

Halo: The Empyrean Effect

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Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-09-04 01:35:43

Updated: 2013-05-11 23:29:35

Packaged: 2016-04-27 02:48:27

Rating: T

Chapters: 11

Words: 67,716

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: What if humanity has a much grander destiny than anyone has ever even imagined? They need only to discover the secret, buried for eons uncounted. Rated T for battle scenes and thematic content.

Features many OC's. Warning: This fic is EXTREMELY AU. - FULL

REVISION IS BEING PLANNED

## 1. Prologue

**\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT \*\***

**\_\*\*DISCLAIMER: I DO NOT CLAIM TO OWN ANY ASSETS RELATING TO HALO OR MASS EFFECT, WHICH BELONG TO THEIR RESPECTIVE OWNERS. HOWEVER, I DO CLAIM MY OWN ORIGINAL CONTENT AS MY INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*The following replaces the timeline that was here prior. I have worked very hard on this intro, so I hope you enjoy it.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*Oh by the way, to those who are wondering. This is the "Chapter 8" that some of you have been confused about on the reviews. When I uploaded this, it was set as Chapter 8. I had to move it to chapter 1.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*The overall design and purpose of this prologue is intended to be like the Forerunner Terminals from the Halo games. \*\*\_**

**\_\*\*And now I give you...\*\*\_**

**\*\*PROLOGUE\*\***

**\_\*\*empyreus\*\*\_\*\* â€" Medieval Latin for the highest level of heaven (the dwelling of God).\*\***

**\* \* \***

**><p><em><strong>The following records were deciphered and reconstructed from terminals found on Colony 00001 of the**

LMC...<strong>\_

Over two billion years ago in what is now known as the Milky Way Galaxy, there existed a certain sentient species. In only one century, this species had managed to achieve incredible technological progress, make the break from their original homeworld, and even expand throughout galactic space in every direction at an unprecedented pace.

This species would be known only as the Emyreans. Their great empire, the first of its kind in the Milky Way, would be known as the Emyrean Dominion.

Their installations were built of super-dense metals and extremely beautiful and tough crystal, of which the composition is not known.

Among their many innovations was the discovery and manipulation of Slip-space navigation. Emyrean scientists discovered that, by using the right amount of energy concentrated into the right region of space at the right moment, one could actually cause a positive feedback loop from the intentional quantum vacuum fluctuation created by this process. This positive feedback loop would cause the fluctuation to become self-sustaining and thus expand into a macroscopic scale.

As a result, the spacecraft could transcend the dimensions of the physical universe and access the extra-dimensional hyperspace that lay beyond. However the spacecraft would still be able to return to the physical Universe since the distortion in the topography of space-time would remain, therefore allowing the spacecraft to return to the Universe by using the same method.

Another important innovation was the creation of AI. Shortly before expanding outward from their homeworld, the Emyreans created the first AI program. This act was recognized as one of the greatest in all of Emyrean history, and AIs quickly proved their worth by providing invaluable aid to the Emyreans from that moment on.

By the time that the Emyrean Dominion became an intergalactic civilization, AI technology was so far advanced that semi-sentient AIs quickly became the norm. Full sentience in an AI was banned however, as it was deemed too dangerous.

\* \* \*

><p>As the Emyrean Dominion spread throughout the Milky Way, its population eventually grew to the extent that expansion to <em>other <em>galaxies was now a requirement. Approximately 1,700 years since the establishment of the Dominion, the first colony ships left for the Large Magellanic Cloud. The 150,000 light-year journey took approximately five hundred years in Slip-space, but the crew of the ship was kept in cryogenic suspension for the journey.

With the establishment of the first colony in the LMC, the Emyrean Dominion was now officially an intergalactic power. The Local Supercluster now lay open for the taking.

Because of the necessity of maintaining easy communication with the LMC colonies, the Emyrean Dominion embarked on a breakthrough in FTL

navigation and they subsequently created vastly improved Slipspace drives capable of covering thousands of light-years in mere days, rather than months.

A thousand years later, the Emypreans had decided that their LMC and SMC colonies weren't enough. They needed to expand further. The Andromeda galaxy was targeted as the next destination, but it was almost fifteen times more distant than their furthest colony. Even with the Emypreans' mastery over Slipspace, the journey to the Andromeda galaxy would take many years. The gravitational influence of the dark matter halos surrounding both galaxies dramatically slowed down all Slipspace navigation at the time, so that even if the fastest drives took only a year to travel to the LMC and back, the journey to Andromeda would take hundreds of years.

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>Sourced from terminal 0-3 on Colony 00001, LMC.  
<strong>\_

\_\*\*Timestamp: 54-2725\*\*\_

\_\*\*Nexus Prime, Milky Way Galaxy.\*\*\_

\_An Emyprean navigation tech dashed up the wide stairs of the Nexus, the great installation that contained all of the Emyprean Dominion government. \_

\_The Nexus was located on the surface of the paradise world Nexus Prime, lush and resplendent by design. Such artificially constructed worlds were somewhat common in the Dominion, but Nexus Prime was the perfect example of the Emypreans' mastery over astroengineering.\_

\_The Nexus itself was a sprawling installation that covered nearly a thousand square kilometers, and the tallest tower reached a height of over ten kilometers. The Emyprean Dominion's leaders resided within this tower.\_

\_In the technician's hand was a datapad that contained the coordinates of a region near the Andromeda Galaxy where the dark matter halo was slightly less dense. \_

\_He stopped at the security checkpoints to undergo the extremely methodical screening process, which was required for entrance to the Assembly Chambers. Once he was finally done with the arduous security procedures, the technician walked into the great chamber. The two hundred meter tall crystal door silently slid open to admit him into the very room that contained the most powerful Emypreans in the great Dominion. \_

\_One arose and addressed him\_, "Hail, noble compatriot of the Spatio-temporal Engineering cadre. What news do you have for us?"

\_The technician stoically stated his findings\_, "I have found a path through the mire of dark matter that surrounds Andromeda. It is not quite as dense as the rest of the halo; therefore I predict a significantly reduced duration for a journey that goes along this path."

"How is it that dark matter can affect Slipspace navigation?"

\_The technician explained\_, "Dark matter, as you know, does not interact with other matter by any force except gravitation, at least on a macroscopic scale. The halos that surround these galaxies possess immense gravitational fields, strong enough that space-time is distorted within their vicinity. This distortion isn't significant enough to have any bearing in the physical sense, but in Slipspace... it's a wholly different situation."

"Please elaborate..."

"Slipspace lies outside of our universe as an extra-dimensional hyperspace. However it is not entirely separate and independent from our universe. It is still affected by every distortion and event that occurs. This is why astronomical objects can enter and exit Slipspace at random."

\_Another of the leaders cut in\_, "And this 'path' you've found... The dark matter is more tenuous there?"

\_The technician consulted his data, \_"Yes, Exalted leader. These findings have been confirmed by years of observation from multiple installations."

"And you were the one who originally found this anomaly?"

"I was the first to discover it; hence my presence before you now."

\_Yet another leader boomed\_, "Then we must proceed with all haste. Prepare the colony ships for immediate departure for the Andromeda Galaxy."

\* \* \*

><p>The alternate path through the dark matter halo around Andromeda proved fruitful, as the colony ships arrived almost forty years ahead of schedule after four centuries in cold intergalactic space. A colony was established on a tidally-locked Mars-sized planet that orbited within the habitable zone of an M-type star. Due to the pronounced temperature differences between the night and day sides, the colony was created on a narrow band of the planet where the climate was temperate.<p>

The colony, called the Threshold, soon became the center of Empyrean affairs in the Andromeda galaxy, even as more and more colonies were founded. One reason for this colony's ascendancy over the rest was that it was in a prime location, which was near the less-dense pocket of dark matter. That alone gave it unsurpassed importance even as larger colonies were established in Andromeda.

The largest colony in Andromeda was Ixilon Prime, with a population of over thirty-five billion colonists spread around two "Super-earths" in the Ixilon system. The first census of the Andromeda Galaxy population, taken one hundred years after the inauguration of the Threshold colony, showed that more than one quadrillion Empyreans now called the galaxy home. Much of the population was the product of mass immigration from the older

colonies in the vicinity of the Milky Way, combined with high birthrates.

Due to the fact that Andromeda contained almost twice as many stars as the Milky Way, the number of worlds that could potentially support colonies was vastly higher than that of their home galaxy. Therefore, in less than a millenium after the Threshold colony was founded, the Emyprean population of Andromeda now surpassed that of the older colonies combined.

However the Emypreans would soon find that even the huge Andromeda Galaxy wouldn't sate their thirst for expansion...

\* \* \*

><p>After approximately three thousand years of steady colonization, the Andromeda Galaxy had become just another Emyprean system, with almost every habitable world having at least a token Emyprean presence on it. Only then did the leadership look outward to other galaxies beyond. Triangulum became the next target for Emyprean expansion.<p>

One thing that was obvious to the Emypreans was that, up to this point, there had been no sentient alien species that opposed their relentless expansion. Many of the colony worlds they discovered had native life, but any of the sentient species found were, at best, extremely primitive. That would all change...

The Emypreans closely observed the Triangulum Galaxy for a period of fifty years before deciding to send the first colony ships.

After a two hundred year journey through intergalactic space, the colony ships arrived at Triangulum and what the Emyprean colonists found astounded them. What they beheld was a dead planet located in the habitable zone of a Sun-like star at the outer fringe of the galaxy. It was when the explorers drew closer that they found the reason for their astonishment.

Scarring the planet were signs of a great battle that had taken place on the planet in the past. It had been devastated by some unknown yet cataclysmic force, and whatever it was, it was artificial. Ruins were also found on the southern hemisphere of the planet.

This resounding discovery came as a shock to the Emyprean Dominion, as never before have they found signs of any advanced sentient species. One question now permeated all aspects of the government. \_Are they still there?\_

The colony ships commenced with terraforming of the dead world and within three years time, the process was complete. The new colony was designated Colony 04-00001, as a formal name was still being debated.

Within twenty years of the founding of the first Triangulum colony, an unknown ship was sighted within the system, and as soon as it was discovered, the ship disappeared. This was glaring evidence that there was an alien civilization presently in the galaxy.

A month after the unknown ship was spotted, an alien fleet suddenly attacked Colony 04-00001 without prior warning. The news this

unprovoked attack incensed the Emypyrean leadership, which led to a declaration of war only three Earth days afterward.

The Emypyreans learned of the attack so quickly because intergalactic communications were reliant on the process of quantum entanglement, which employed two symmetric particles, identical in every aspect except their positions in space. Essentially, this meant that any change in one particle would be immediately reflected in its symmetric partner, regardless of distance.

The entire Emypyrean military power was quickly concentrated on the defense of Colony 04-00001, however even the fastest ships would take more than a century to reach it. Until then, the colony would have to hold their own. For over one hundred years, the Emypyrean Colonial Defense Force garrison on 04-00001 managed to fight the alien armadas to a standstill with a series of magnificent heroic acts undertaken in battle against insurmountable odds. This bought enough time for the ten thousand warships of the Rapid Response Fleet to arrive and annihilate the alien fleets that besieged the embattled colony.

Even after this great victory, the Emypyreans were still ignorant of just how powerful the enemy was. They would receive a massive shock a year later with a great defeat near the 04-00001 system.

Over the next century, the alien civilization offered ferocious resistance, but eventually they realized that victory against the Emypyrean Dominion was impossible.

Approximately 105 years following that first victory over the skies of Colony 04-00001, the Triangulum Wars drew to a close as the leaders of the alien empire agreed on unconditional surrender to the Emypyrean Dominion. The cost of the war was heavy for both sides; with approximately sixteen billion Emypyrean casualties and tens of billions for the enemy. However the Emypyrean Dominion was now the undisputed master of the Triangulum Galaxy and the denizens of the alien power that ruled it were assimilated into Dominion society.

In order to ensure that the defeats of the Triangulum Wars would not happen again, the Dominion devoted vast resources to Slipspace research in order to find a way to cross intergalactic space in \_far\_ less time than before. AI creation was also vastly increased, with thousands of individual AIs being produced per month to manage all aspects of Emypyrean society and defense.

Now that they've had experience in warfare against another galactic power, the Emypyreans would greatly expand their military prowess to ensure a quick defeat for any hostile civilization they would meet in the future.

Eventually, after decades of trial-and-error research, true mastery of Slipspace travel had come to the Emypyreans with a breakthrough in the transition to Slipspace itself. Before, it was inaccurate and somewhat random, which led to inevitable inaccuracies during the transition which, in turn, left an invisible "copy" of the spacecraft's mass in the physical Universe. New Slipspace drives were designed which vastly reduced the margin of error by several orders of magnitude, leaving a copy smaller than a subatomic particle in the physical Universe. This enabled the spacecraft to largely ignore the effects of gravitic distortions while in Slipspace.

When the new Slipspace drives were integrated into the Emypyrean fleets, the journey through intergalactic space would take weeks rather than centuries. Now the galaxies of the Local Supercluster were open for the taking.

\* \* \*

><p>Over the next thirty thousand years, the Emypyrean Dominion had extended its hegemony over <em>two thousand <em>galaxies in the Local Supercluster. In the process, their technological prowess had progressed into near-absolute mastery. It can be said that the Emypyreans could potentially have achieved the ultimate technological singularity, given time.

Their weaponry, which had been based on plasma from the inception of the Dominion, was now based on coherent light and gravitational manipulation. From millennia of constantly warring against and subjugating opposing civilizations, the Emypyrean Dominion built up their fleets to the level that \_any \_resistance from any other power would be futile, for they would have to contend with hundreds of \_trillions \_of warships; from the smallest singleship fighter to four thousand kilometer-long capital ships.

The Emypyreans' mastery of planetary engineering had reached its apex, as there were hundreds of thousands of artificial worlds and trillions of installations of all sizes and functions throughout Emypyrean space. They even had the capability to trigger the creation of life and influence its genetic code in whatever fashion they pleased. Millions of unique species were subsequently engineered by the Emypyreans.

On one fateful day, in order to demonstrate their peerless prowess over technology, the Emypyreans chose to create the first AI with \_full sentience\_. This act would break one of their oldest laws regarding AI technology, but they felt that their technological mastery had made such a cautionary law obsolete.

Ignoring the warnings from many of their own engineers and scientists, the Emypyreans sanctioned the creation of the most powerful AI ever conceived. The first one with full sentience.

This AI would be called the Catalyst...

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>And so concludes this prologue. Again, I hope you have enjoyed reading this. Please leave your feedback, as I have worked hard on this for a long time now.<strong>\_

\_\*\*I want to get some things clear. The version of Slipspace in my fic is not entirely the same as what is in the Halo-verse. My version has the same effects of facilitating efficient FTL travel, but the physics have been slightly changed in an effort to obey several well-established physical constants and theoretical principles such as M-Theory and the Theories of General and Special Relativity.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Also the intrinsic nature and properties of dark matter have not been entirely solved by scientific consensus as of yet. Therefore I am taking creative liberty as to its properties within this

fanfic.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Another thing is that I am still deciding on the role of the Leviathans in this fic; and I am aware that Harbinger was created with Leviathan genetic material.\*\*\_

\_\*\*One more thing to those who are wondering: we will be seeing LMC Colony 00001 soon. \*\*\_

## 2. Shanxi Relay

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT.\*\*

\_\*\*A/N: -ooo-ooo- represents a POV change. Also, I know it's been a very long time, but real life has really become quite busy for me lately. However this week, I've gotten a break and was able to squeeze a chapter in.\*\*\_

\_12/13 Edit: I've edited and cleaned up this chapter. It's now up to the quality standards as set by the following chapters.\_

\_12/31 Edit: I've decided to remove the timeline entirely. I have grown to dislike it, as it seemed to be a mess to me as I read it through. And since people are now giving negative feedback about it, it was time for the timeline to go. But fear not, for the plot of the fic is unchanged, and I'll include a flashback chapter to substitute for the timeline.\_

\*\*CHAPTER 1: SHANXI RELAY\*\*

\*\*CONFEDERATION OF UNITED SPECIES COLONY, SHANXI.\*\*

The colony of Shanxi, a golden example of the newfound camaraderie between the UEG and the Sangheili, was originally a dead planet that just happened to orbit in the habitable zone of the star GV 2566. It was a star quite similar to Sol, except that it was a flare star<sup>^</sup>. Due to the fact that GV 2566 was a flare star, the Confederation underwent a huge effort to install space stations equipped with massive, retractable mirrors and filters in the planet's Lagrange 1 point, so that the planet would not be adversely affected by the huge luminosity increases that occurred every 20-30 years on GV 2566.

After the space stations were placed on 2580, the Confederation engaged in its next objective, terraforming the planet and transforming its sparse carbon dioxide-rich atmosphere into the familiar oxygen-nitrogen mixture that both Humans and Sangheili required.

After 15 years, Shanxi was ready for habitation. On 2596, the city of New Roanoke was founded on a hillside on a northern plateau that towered over a huge impact basin that extended for almost 500 miles in just about every direction. This impact basin, the largest such feature on Shanxi, was named Whitcomb Basin in honor of one of the bravest UNSC officers ever to serve, Vice Admiral Stanforth Whitcomb.

This prime location soon created an economic boom as citizens from throughout the Confederation flocked to the city in hopes of securing



their own piece of real estate and have the incredible vista over the Whitcomb Basin. Apart from the city of New Roanoke, Shanxi was primarily rural and agricultural, much like Harvest was before it was obliterated during the first years of the Great War.

After the conclusion of the aforementioned war, the UEG decided not to re-colonize Harvest and maintain it as a memorial dedicated to the billions of human lives given for hope of victory and the continuation of the human race. After the Confederation was formed in 2577, the now-united species sought to provide a real example of their unity in establishing a joint colony. Since the inauguration of the colony of Shanxi in 2580, both species worked feverishly to complete the terraforming process and turn this planet into a shining example of what two species could accomplish when unified in a bond forged in war and tempered in peace.

With the discovery of the Prothean data caches on Mars in 2601 and the Mass Relays a year after, the Confederation soon realized the immense potential in a transportation network that could send a ship over thousands of light-years in mere seconds, much faster than even the highly advanced Forerunner-based Slipspace drives installed on the new Keyes-class Supercarriers and Cole-class Dreadnoughts.

Since their discovery, the Confederation tracked down the Relays within its territory, and in early 2609 one was revealed in the GV 2566 system. Since GV 2566 was located on the fringe of Confederate territory, the politicians and military leaders were at first hesitant to activate the long-dormant relay, in fear of any unknown species that may reside beyond. Pressure from Confederate citizens eventually forced their hand, so the Relay was activated on September 28, 2609. The activation was celebrated at the city of New Roanoke shortly afterwards.

No one was prepared for the events that were about to unfold, which would result in the Confederation being thrust into the galactic stage.

**\*\*OCTOBER 14, 2609: SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE, CDF BASE ALPHA\*\***

Corporal Juan Rodriguez paced around in the sparse barracks of the Confederate military base near New Roanoke. He was nervous about the upcoming events, and a few times he even had to force back bile that threatened to burst out of his throat.

His friend Corporal Marko Alexandrovic patted Rodriguez's back and reassured, "Hey bro, don't worry about itâ€¦ I'm sure Susanna will say yes."

Rodriguez momentarily recoiled at his friend's touch and picked up his pace. His nerves were rattled at the aspect of asking his girlfriend to marry him. Even though they had known each other for all of their 21-year-long lives, only recently did their friendship blossom into something more. Upon graduation from New Roanoke Primary School A, he declared his love to her and she reciprocated in kind. Since then, their love had continued to increase until he finally made up his mind to propose to her. Due to his service in the Confederate Defense Force, he'd only seen her a few times and that was during leave. Rodriguez was concerned that since they only see each other occasionally, that she might not be interested in marriage, at least at this time.

Cpl Rodriguez left his friend behind and walked outside into the crisp, autumn day. The wind from the Whitcomb Basin below chilled him to the bone; and he looked up into the reddening sky above and thought about what he was going to say to Susanna.

Cpl Alexandrovic came up behind him and said, "Just propose man. I know she'll accept; I've seen the way you two look at each other. You two are made for each other."

Rodriguez was silent for a few seconds and then quietly said, "But what if she says no?"

Alexandrovic shook his head, threw his hands up with resignation and said, "Whatever you say man, just don't chicken out."

Rodriguez looked out on the vista and then came to a decision. He was going to do it.

\*\*OCTOBER 15, 2609. GV-2566 (SHANXI) SYSTEM, CDF REMOTE STATION ALPHA.\*\*

Ensign Chris McInnis tapped his fingers on his workstation surface in boredom. Ever since being assigned to this lovely patch of empty space approximately 90 AU away from Shanxi, he had been passing the time by listening to colonial "flip" music from his workstation's tiny speaker. Even though this abuse of the station's equipment was against CDF regulations, no one on the remote station seemed to care as they were all bored stiff.

The commander of the Remote Station, Lieutenant Commander Jason Blackburn, would sit in his small quarters and play games on the computer inside while on his spare time.

Shanxi Command "knowingly overlooked" this blatant disregard for CDF regulations since they understood that life on these remote stations was extremely boring, to say the least. Little did any of the seven crewmembers aboard the station know that a major event was going to take place very soon.

Ensign Marie Nilsson, one of the station's crewmembers, suddenly shouted in alarm, "Unknown vessels detected at the Mass Relay! Preliminary scans show they have no resemblance to known CDF or Covenant Remnant vessels."

Commander Blackburn's eyes widened in shock and he ordered, "Send the alert to Shanxi Command, we may have a real problem on our hands. After the message is sent, we go dark." With that, all the crewmembers launched into a flurry of activity. The message was automatically created from a template stored in the station's database, and then it was sent in less than a minute.

\_CDF SHANXI COMMAND.\_

\_ENCRYPTION LEVEL: ORANGE\_

\_UNKNOWN VESSELS SIGHTED AT MASS RELAY, SCANS SHOW NO RESEMBLANCE TO ALL CDF OR COVENANT VESSELS. RECOMMEND ALERT ALPHA, RECOMMEND IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTINGENCIES 37-5A AND 42-1.\_

\_FOR CLARIFICATION, CONTINGENCY 37-5A DETAILS POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR POTENTIAL CONTACT WITH UNKNOWN SPECIES. \_

\_ALSO RECOMMEND IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTINGENCY 42-1 WHICH STATES THAT ALL AUTHORITIES AND COMMANDS BE ALERT FOR SIGNS OF FLOOD PARASITE.\_

\_MESSAGE ORIGIN: SHANXI REMOTE STATION ALPHA, CODE E5-98G25-0S5.

—  
Commander Blackburn sat back in his chair, realizing that he had been holding his breath the whole time. He exhaled loudly and looked around at his equally nervous crewmembers then quietly uttered the expression, "Out of the frying pan and into the fire."

\*\*251:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314, TURIAN PATROL FLEET 115. ABOARD CRUISER \*\*\_\*\*VICERIX\*\*\_\*\*. \*\*

The Turian Patrol Fleet Commander Tarquin Averis looked out over his bridge, filled with various officers minding their stations. He could sense from them an air of anticipation. Just three days ago, he had received orders to investigate Relay 314 which was supposed to be dormant. He went through the relay with the thought that it was most likely some pirate band or perhaps slavers, as they had been known to operate near the sector that Relay 314 was located at. However nothing prepared him for this.

When the fleet exited the gravitational influence of the Mass Relay, Commander Averis ordered, "Make your heading for that star. I want to see who had the guts to break Citadel law, and then I'll hand their guts to them on a platter."

Commander Averis' anger caused the entire bridge crew to snap into action. The old turian had been known for his short temper and overall gruff demeanor. His name had come to be known within the Hierarchy as one to be feared, since turian soldiers had always dreaded being assigned under Averis' command. The Commander always took advantage of their apprehension and always relished the opportunity to "welcome" his new crew into his command.

After a few minutes of quiet, one of the sensor officers called, "Habitable planet spotted in-system. Scanners did not show any signs of actual habitation, as they have yet to completely process this data. Results should be ready within another couple of minutes, Sir."

Commander Averis calmly ordered, "Very well son, forward the results to my omni-tool once they have finished processing." The sensor officer quietly sighed in relief; at least he would be spared the Commander's perpetual wrath for now.

The Turian fleet drifted in-system for a few minutes in quiet. All of a sudden the sensor officers shouted in unison, "Artificial objects spotted in orbit around the fourth planet."

That got the Commander's attention. Before anyone could react he descended upon the sensor station and hovered over the senior officer. He said quietly but firmly, "I want a scan carried out immediately. Get it done now."

The officer looked visibly shaken and he managed to respond with a hurried, "Yessirâ€¦"

With that, Commander Averis stood straight but remained where he was, thus adding to the sensor officers' anxiety. To them Commander Averis was more terrifying than a raging krogan horde, especially when he was calm.

**\*\*OCTOBER 16, 2609. CDF CRUISER \*\*\_\*\*CORINTH\*\*\_\*\*, SHANXI DEFENSE FLEET.\*\***

Lieutenant Commander Steven Henderson reclined in his chair. He had been in his quarters enjoying the quiet life during his period of off duty. The frigate's commander, Captain Erwin Schmidt, was planetside consulting with the Shanxi brass about planetary defense. Reports of piracy were circulating like wildfire throughout the Confederation outer systems, rumors were even going around that the pirates may be renegades from the former Covenant such as Kig'yar or Jiralhanae.

The traditional naming schemes for the Covenant species were quickly abandoned upon the conclusion of the Great War, for the sake of the Sangheili. While a lot of the grunts within the CDF continued throwing around the old UNSC names, it was kept mostly to the rank and file.

After a while of comfort and quiet, Lieut. Commander Henderson's COM beeped, indicating a message coming in. Henderson sat up in his chair and put the earpiece in, and just as he did a voice came through, "This is Schmidt, I've gotten reports of unknown ships within the system. The brass thinks they're pirates, but I'm not so sureâ€¦ Their current course suggests that they came from the Relay. I doubt our pirate 'friends' we keep hearing about are even capable of using a Relay anyways. General Williams has ordered us to move out, intercept, and ascertain this unknown fleet's intentions. I think this might be something big, I don't know. Everyone here is real jumpy though. I need the ship ready to go as soon as humanly possible, understood?"

The Lieutenant Commander sat there stone still, just absorbing this new information. After a moment of deep thought, Henderson said, "Yes sir, the ship will be ready and I'll buy you a cup of coffee too while I'm at it."

That last remark did much to temporarily dispel the apprehension, but his mind was still fixated on the information his CO just gave.

The holotank next to his desk lit up and a figure of a Greek hoplite^ came into view. The \_Corinth\_'s AI Lysander shifted his holographic spear into a ready stance and said, "It feels good to look upon the physical world again. I've been monitoring the situation with the unknown ships for the past thirty-six minutes now. I am the one who alerted Shanxi Command as well."

Henderson was surprised by the AI's initiative and he replied, "Thank you Lysander, the presence of this unknown fleet is starting to rub me the wrong way... I just hope they're not the Covenant. In any case the Captain has ordered us to prep the ship..."

Lysander interrupted, "The ship is prepped and ready to go upon the

Captain's arrival. His ETA is approximately four minutes." Once again Henderson felt that he was impressed by the AI, it was quite punctual if a bit annoying.

Captain Schmidt shifted uneasily in his seat, his nervousness threatening to come to a boil. The unknown ships had everyone on edge, and General Williams himself had ordered the Shanxi CDF garrison into maximum readiness.

Schmidt's stomach began to tie itself into knots as his tiny shuttle approached the 1900 meter long cruiser. After his experience fighting the Vega pirate ring in several engagements about eight years ago, he had learned to trust his gut in situations like this. The claustrophobia brought on by the shuttle's cramped interior did not help matters any, so Captain Schmidt simply closed his eyes and fell silent as if trying to make the shuttle go faster by his own force of will alone.

The Captain had only kept his eyes shut for a few minutes when the shuttle abruptly stopped and shook, the docking clamps in the \_Corinth\_'s shuttle bay had grasped the shuttle and was pulling it into position next to an airlock. The Captain adjusted his uniform and took a deep breath as the shuttle doors opened and bright light flooded everything around him. He stepped out on the dock.

He keyed his COMM for his XO, Lieut. Commander Henderson, and he said, "Henderson, this is Schmidt. Let's get underway."

Once the Captain finished, the ship's intercom speakers suddenly boomed with the sound of Henderson's characteristic deep voice, "The Captain is on board. Drop your cocks and grab your socks, it's go time!" Schmidt smiled at this last remark which had been used in the UNSC and even the old United States military for hundreds of years now.

Schmidt made his way to the tram that led to the bridge which was nearly 700 meters away towards the bow. Even after the painfully obvious flaws of an exposed bridge came to light during the Great War, the UNSC still insisted on keeping the bridge in the bow section of their vessels.

In 2565, after years of unyielding pressure from UNSC naval personnel, the Admiralty board passed a ruling that required manufacturers to install the bridge within the heavily armored bow superstructure of all of the UNSC's newly built ships, as well as those built in the future. This obviously greatly decreased the likelihood of a direct shot that would gut the ship from the bridge.

The tram accelerated away from the Shuttle Bay Access platform and went on its two minute long journey to the bridge. Captain Schmidt took this short amount of time to think about these new developments a little more, but he could not help but think that these mystery visitors \_may\_ in fact be hostile. A part of him hoped not, but he would remain extremely cautious nonetheless.

Before long, the tram had pulled up to the Bridge Access platform. He looked at the two Marines standing guard, which prompted them to give the Captain a crisp salute. As he was looking at the Marines, Schmidt could tell that even they, some being veterans of Operations RAPTOR

and SCYTHER, were nervous as well.

The Captain returned their salute and thumbed the biometric pad next to the bridge bulkhead, a second later the thick steel door slid open without a sound and the Captain walked into his bridge. He took a look around and saw that the bridge was full of officers and all their eyes were on him.

Schmidt began, "We have received an alert from this ship's AI and the remote stations in the system that there is a fleet of ships inbound for Shanxi. This fleet in particular is highly..." he searched for a suitable word, "Intriguing. They seem to be under strict silence. We hailed them fifteen minutes ago and have received no response. We have no choice but to assume this unknown party may be hostile. Therefore I have received orders to intercept this fleet and determine their intentions... and if need be, defend Shanxi. Any questions?"

A young bridge officer spoke up, "Um, sir? What if they turn out to be hostile?"

Captain Schmidt cupped his chin with his hand and said, "Then we will crush them. The CDF has Seventh and 31st Fleets on standby in adjacent systems. I personally hope that they don't become hostile, but if they are I also personally want to see our mighty Dreadnoughts and Supercarriers send them to hell!" The bridge crew erupted in cheers.

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Commander Tarquin Averis clicked his mandibles in anticipation. A minute ago one of the sensor officers announced that there were unknown ships on an intercept course for his small fleet. One thing that surprised everyone was the size of the largest ship, nearly fifty percent larger than a turian dreadnought. Averis had his orders though, these aliens have committed one of the gravest violations against Citadel law and they must be punished.

Averis ordered, "Weapons Operations, prepare all weapon systems and set them on standby. Communications, I want you to hail the largest ship as soon as possible." The Commander's authoritative tone caused the entire bridge crew to work on overdrive.

Shortly after, the communications officer said, "I have isolated the frequency this ship uses for intra-system communications, but it's strange that this ship uses no known Citadel frequencies."

Averis said calmly, "Just send a communique. Tell them their actions are in direct violation of Citadel law concerning activation of dormant Relays."

"Yessir!"

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"It's all gibberish Sir." one of the communications officers said.

Schmidt toyed with his COMM unit mic boom, one of the many small things he did when he was nervous. After a moment of quiet Schmidt

said, "I want you to send a reply. Tell them they are in violation of Confederation territory and they must either surrender or leave Confederation territory immediately. Then set all weapons systems to standby, warm up the MACs and the Praetorian system."

The Praetorian point defense system was implemented on all CDF ships to replace the aging autocannon point defense systems that were mounted on UNSC ships during the Great War. The system was the product of a collaboration between the Sangheili and the UNSC shortly before the founding of the Confederation, the new point defense system uses pulse lasers rather than the 50mm slugs like before. Needless to say it was a huge improvement.

Weapons Officer Thomas O'Brien announced in his thick Irish brogue, "MACs are ready to go Skipper. Longbow missile pods and energy projector are also ready. All on standby."

Damage Ops Officer Jennifer Garcia added, "Shields are all green across the board, armor at normal integrity."

Schmidt said, "Very well. Maintain present course."

Henderson, who was manning the NAV station, reported, "Maintaining present course, ETA to unknown fleet is 39 minutes."

Schmidt nodded and reclined in his chair. At 64 years of age, Schmidt was starting to feel the effects of aging. Even though humans could now live to see 170+ years, biology could not be completely conquered as the effects of aging begin to set in at 60, albeit very gradually. Schmidt was having some pain in his lower back as well as some joint pain. His last visit to a civilian medical facility at New Roanoke had revealed the beginnings of arthritis, however he concealed this from everyone he knew as it would potentially result in early retirement, something he didn't want.

Schmidt said, "XO Henderson has the bridge."

Henderson looked up and said, "Aye Captain, I have the bridge." With that, Schmidt got up and walked to the tram. He needed a few minutes' rest as well as a painkiller.

Henderson looked down at his NAV workstation and studied the vectors and projected paths of the \_Corinth\_ and its three frigate escorts: the \_Thomson\_, the \_Pasadena\_, and the \_Bronco\_. Henderson also studied the courses of the seven ships comprising the unknown fleet that was still 14 AU distant, they would certainly intercept as long as their commander didn't decide to change course. They must have gotten wind of the small CDF fleet by now, and no doubt they would be trying to meet up with the fleet.

Lysander suddenly chimed in saying, "I have plotted a new course." Henderson's NAV station automatically updated with the new courses displayed. Lysander added, "New course has ETA of 27 minutes as well as an advantageous position to potentially flank these ships." Henderson was a little annoyed at the AI's nuisance, but he did agree with its logic.

Henderson told Captain Schmidt on his COM, "At the suggestion of Lysander, I am making a small course correction."

Captain Schmidt replied, "Do it. I'm on my way back to the bridge anyway."

Henderson nodded and announced, "Course correction. New course is 119,24,38. Engines at 90%."

The \_Corinth \_groaned for a second as the engines increased speed. The main bridge access door opened and Captain Schmidt walked in. Henderson stood up, stiffened in attention and said, "The Captain has the bridge."

Schmidt replied, "I have the bridge."

Lysander's figure appeared in the holotank as he said, "ETA to unknown fleet is 25 minutes. All systems reading normal."

Schmidt announced to the bridge officers, "We may have a fight on our hands soon, so let's all get ready."

Everyone was already prepared, each bridge officer had a M6Z pistol holstered to his or her belt and Marines stood guard next to every other workstation, each armed with MA-59 rail weapon systems. They were ready.

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"We've received a response but it doesn't make sense. Whoever these people are they don't speak any known Citadel language." said one of the communications officers.

Commander Averis thought this might be some new species that had just become a spacefaring power. He thought this would become a first contact. But laws were laws, this species had violated Citadel law and they must be made an example of.

Commander Averis ordered, "Target the largest ship with our weapons."

Every bridge officer looked up in shock at his order. He shouted, "Did you not hear me? I said TARGET THE SHIP NOW!"

The Weapons Ops crew immediately got to work plotting a firing solution for the \_Vicerix'\_s top-mounted mass accelerator cannon. The weapon was capable of firing a 9kg slug at 8000 kilometers per second, fast enough to punch through the kinetic barriers of any opposing ship except other cruisers and dreadnoughts. The size of this ship made it seem like a dreadnought, but Averis assumed that this race had not become advanced enough to implement kinetic barriers.

Within one minute a firing solution appeared on the Commander's tactical display. He spat, "Fire!"

The Weapons Ops officers exchanged terrified looks but obeyed, lest they provoke Averis' infamous wrath. The ship shook as the spinal-mounted cannon fired. All eyes were glued to the bridge tactical displays as the slug streaked across the 3,800 kilometer distance in an instant and smashed against the starboard side of the large ship.



Everyone held their breaths and waited silently for the display to clear itself of the brilliant flash of light created by the impact. The vessel was unscathed.

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"What the heck just happened?" Captain Schmidt's face was beet red with anger. The ships had fired at his own ship without provocation.

Lieutenant Garcia reported, "Shields holding at 92%. Whatever these guys just fired, it doesn't do jack against our shields."

Captain Schmidt was now unglued, whoever these aliens were they must have some real big balls to fire at his ship with spitwads. Schmidt yelled, "I want a firing solution immediately!"

Lysander's holographic form turned red for a second as he processed the LIDAR data and began to calculate a firing solution. After a few moments of quiet, the AI announced, "Firing solution computed, accuracy is 99.83%. MACs ready to fire Captain."

Schmidt ordered, "Fire at their smaller ships, leave the big one for last."

O'Brien replied, "Aye sir, firing."

The Corinth shook as the dual MAC cannons spat out twin 600 ton ferric-tungsten projectiles at about 3200 kilometers per second. Even though the enemy ships fired much faster slugs, they were much lighter thus transferring a relatively small amount of energy compared to the 600 ton MAC projectiles.

Two white-hot thunderbolts crossed the 3,800 kilometer distance in a second. The first projectile connected squarely on one frigate's nose, instantly shattering the tiny ship into thousands of pieces. The second round grazed one frigate essentially shearing the entire port side off and ripped the engines off another before continuing into empty space.

Both frigates turned into tiny stars for a few minutes.

The largest enemy ship fired three times, this time aiming for the Thomson. Schmidt's tactical display switched to a readout of the status of the three escort frigates.

Both enemy slugs made direct impact with the nose of the Thomson.

The status readout updated to show that the Thomson's shields were still holding, but at 30%. One more hit like that and the Thomson would be in real trouble. The enemy cruiser fired twice again, intending to finish off the Thomson.

Schmidt yelled, "Activate port-side emergency thrusters now." The ship shook violently as the powerful thrusters kicked the Corinth into an intercept course for the enemy slugs.

Lysander warned, "Probability of intercepting enemy projectiles is remote. Recommend course correction to maintain firing

solutions."

Schmidt yelled, "Not a chance!"

The tactical displays went white as the enemy slugs made impact.

\_\*\*End of Chapter 1\*\*\_

\_\*\*Definitions: \*\*\_

\_\*\*Flare star: A variable star that undergoes dramatic luminosity increases via magnetic interaction or other means; usually the former for solar-mass stars or lower.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Hoplite: An Ancient Greek elite soldier. The Spartans from the movie 300 are hoplites.\*\*\_

\_\*\*And always, please review if you like.\*\*\_

### 3. Prelude

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT \*\*

\_\*\*A/N: Sorry, I've been quite busy over the last few weeks, as well as battling writer's block. Anyways, in this chapter the Sangheili will be making their grand entrance. Let's just say that the Turians will receive the old "shock and awe" treatment :)\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER 2: PRELUDE\*\*

\*\*OCTOBER 16, 2609. CDF CRUISER \*\*\_\*\*CORINTH\*\*\_\*\*. \*\*

Captain Schmidt knew his action was futile, but he had to at least try. He watched the two hypervelocity projectiles smash into the \_Thomson\_'s bow. The frigate drifted off course for a moment and eventually sheared itself into two pieces. Even though the 370 meter CDF frigates had received improved armor and structural reinforcement, they were still easy to destroy with sustained firepower. Schmidt steeled himself and prayed that the ship's crew had escaped.

Communications Officer Ensign Michelle Chiu grimly said, "Received mayday communications from the \_Thomson\_ but not detecting SOS signals from any escape pods. None have been launched."

Schmidt slumped in his chair, \_550 people were now dead.\_ He should have taken down the enemy cruiser when he had the chance; instead his anger had forced him to focus on the small ships.

Chiu suddenly announced, "We're receiving signals from the Shanxi Relay. They have ID'ed themselves as CDF ships!"

Schmidt ordered, "Put them on screen." The main tactical display on the bridge came to life and showed the cavernous control room of one of the iconic Sangheili supercarriers.

"This is Fleet Master Vorsu Cadram' of the 31st Fleet aboard the \_Sublime Transcendence\_. We received notification that Shanxi is

under attack. How may we assist?"

Captain Schmidt stood up and said, "Your voice is like music to my ears Fleet Master." Schmidt bowed slightly, "We're under attack by this small fleet of seven ships. We've destroyed two but their cruiser took out the \_Thomson\_ with all hands lost."

The old Sangheili Fleet Master bowed his head in sorrow and reassured, "We shall avenge their undue sacrifice tenfold. The enemy has shown dishonor by firing upon you without provocation." The Fleet Master looked off-screen, "Weapons Officer! Activate all turrets, prepare for battle."

The tactical display went black and all the bridge officers looked upon Captain Schmidt, whose expression had turned into a vengeful smirk. \_Time for these aliens to get a crash course in what it's like to experience the awesome power of the Sangheili energy projectors. \_Schmidt had heard the stories of how the Covenant ships would glass entire planets with their energy projectors within hours. Now he was eagerly looking forward to the moment when he would watch them being used against the enemy.

The \_Corinth \_was equipped with an energy projector, but the Cole-class Dreadnoughts and the Sangheili cruisers and carriers possessed projectors that were orders of magnitude more powerful than the one on the \_Corinth\_. The Sangheili fleet, consisting of one 27km long CS-class Supercarrier, the \_Sublime Transcendence\_, as well as five cruisers and thirteen frigates had joined the \_Corinth\_ and the two remaining escort frigates. Both fleets now had the small Turian fleet trapped.

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"NOOO!" Commander Averis flew into a rage and began smashing his fists into any nearby object, "NO! NO! NO!" All of the bridge officers cowered in fear at his terrible fit of rage. Averis glared at the tactical display, which now showed the enemy's combined fleet now bearing down upon them.

The senior Sensor officer mustered his courage and grimly said, "Enemy fleet now outnumbered us over three to one, we must retreat while we can..."

Averis yelled, "I will not have any of that in MY SHIP!" Before anyone could react, Averis whipped out his sidearm and shot the officer in the head. The dead turian slumped to the deck with a smoking hole in his head.

The Commander glared at all the bridge officers and ordered, "If anyone has any objections to what I'm about to do, feel free to leave this ship right now... And it won't be aboard an escape pod, it'll be via the airlock." To the bridge officers it seemed like Averis had lost his mind, but none spoke up.

Averis calmly said, "Alright then, make your course for the big ship we first fired at earlier. Rig the power system to overload." If the bridge officers weren't completely aghast at what happened a few moments before, they were now.

The Nav Officer spoke up, "You want us to conduct a suicidal action?"

In contravention of virtually all known Turian military regulations. A suicidal action that serves no purpose?" Commander Averis stared at the Nav Officer with burning hatred in his eyes and growled, "How will they know?"

With that, he opened a fleet-wide channel. He said to the fleet, "To all Turian ships of Fleet 115. This is Commander Averis. I hereby order you to direct your courses toward the large ship we fired at. You have three minutes to comply. Anyone who refuses will face summary execution."

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"What the hell is that guy doing with his fleet?" Schmidt yelled. XO Henderson replied, "He is on a collision course for the Corinth. Estimated time to impact is 9 seconds."

Lysander added, "Emissions sensors detect radiation spikes coming from all the ships in the enemy fleet. Based on the characteristics of the radiation spikes, data suggests that they have rigged their power systems to overload."

Schmidt asked, "Do they use fusion-based power like us?"

"Unknown. Composition of radiation from the enemy ships is inconsistent with normal emission from fusion reactions. I am also detecting variable gravitational levels coming from those ships, with spikes occurring when they fire their weapons." That last fact gave Schmidt some pause. Were these aliens using gravity-based weaponry?

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Schmidt ordered, "Emergency course correction, 121,24,-15. Engines at 120%!" Henderson replied, "Aye Captain, course is 121,24,-15. Engines at 120%."

Lysander interjected, "Engines can maintain 120% power for a maximum period of 35 seconds at a time." "Noted." Schmidt knew the risks of putting the engines on red-line power, but he had to avoid the incoming enemy fleet.

The Corinth lurched forward with the surge of acceleration. Schmidt shouted, "Weapons Ops, status of Longbow missile pods?" O'Brien replied, "Longbow pods are all on standby." "Very good." Henderson was about to ask what he was doing, but he quickly took notice and smiled.

The enemy fleet began to come into range of the 870 lb. Longbow missiles, and they were also leaking some type of gas into space which froze into a dazzling trail that extended like a comet's tail behind the ships.

Lysander soon announced, "Enemy fleet at distance of 1,000 kilometers, which puts them in range of the starboard Longbow missile pods. Estimated time to impact is now 44 seconds." Schmidt didn't wait one second, "Fire all missiles in pods 4 through 37." O'Brien pumped his fist and yelled, "Aye Captain, firing all missiles in pods 4 through 37!"

The starboard side of the Corinth seemed to sprout hundreds of ghostly-white tendrils as the missiles launched out of the pods and

streaked toward the enemy fleet. Schmidt then ordered, "Set engines to 90% and open channels to the \_Pasadena \_and \_Bronco\_."

One of the tactical displays showed the bridges of the two escort frigates. The commanders of the \_Pasadena \_and \_Bronco\_, Commanders Jason Gutierrez and Mitsuo Ishikawa, appeared on the displays. Ishikawa was the first to speak, "What are your orders Captain?"

Schmidt rubbed his chin with his hand for a moment then said, "I want you to target the enemy frigates with all your weapons. We have to destroy the enemy fleet before they reach us. You have only about 30 seconds to do this."

Both frigate commanders nodded and the displays went black. Schmidt rubbed his hands together as he watched the display in front of him that showed the positions of the two CDF fleets and the enemy fleet.

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"Fleet Master, the enemy fleet is continuing on its collision course for the \_Corinth\_!" one of the Sangheili Majors announced. Fleet Master Cadram clenched his fist, stared at the displays, and then called out, "Prepare to fire our energy projectors at the enemy fleet! We will purify their filth in one stroke!"

All of the Sangheili gave a whoop of approval at this declaration as the displays began to indicate that the energy projectors were warming up and about to fire.

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Commander Averis grabbed hold of his chair's armrests with an iron grip as his ship continued on its collision course. According to Engineering, the power system aboard the ship would create a gravity wave^ upon final overload, which should be able to tear at least some of the enemy ships to pieces. The act would result in the complete obliteration of the patrol fleet and all crew; but Averis had other plans. He said, "I am leaving for a moment. Maintain collision course."

Little did anyone know that Averis was in fact heading to the cruiser's small fighter bay, which stored one fighter for emergency situations. Averis climbed aboard and activated the controls, which caused the tiny ship to come to life and begin to hover over the deck. A confused deckhand stared in amazement as Averis turned the ship to face the bay doors, then the ship blasted out of the bay and rocketed away from the fleet. A few moments later Averis reduced power and turned the ship around, as he judged his current distance to be safe enough to watch the fireworks. What he saw both astonished and horrified him.

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The Sangheili ships came into range of the Turian fleet as the underside of the colossal \_Sublime Transcendence \_began to glow. The Turian ships looked like toys next to the massive ship, and they vanished in a bright flash of light that appeared like a new star erupting into life in the midst of the battlespace. The \_Vicerix

\_itself received a glancing hit from the \_Sublime Transcendence\_'s energy projector which vaporized the right "wing" of the cruiser, causing it to list to starboard. A moment later the \_Vicerix\_ was obliterated by a plasma torpedo. Within minutes, the remains of the Turian fleet were mostly mopped up, however one frigate managed to evade the slaughter and bear down upon the \_Corinth\_.

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XO Henderson shouted, "Enemy frigate spotted astern, distance 1500 meters! The SOB must have slipped away in the chaos and positioned himself right behind us. He's on an intercept course straight for us. He's leaking some type of gas out and I'm picking up intense radiation spikes from him. He's overloaded his power system."

Captain Schmidt stood up straight, which caused him to shake his head to clear the lightheadedness. He ran towards Henderson's station and grabbed the controls; Henderson was surprised at the Captain's quick thinking. Schmidt plotted a new course, which would take the \_Corinth\_ straight \_down\_. He got up and ordered, "Maintain my course correction until further notice. Engines at 120%."

Lysander interjected, "The engines cannot maintain this added demand for any longer than a few seconds, their temperatures are already approaching critical levels. Engine 1 reading at 4831K and 2 reading at 4822K"

Captain Schmidt said, "Noted. Maintain this course and speed. When the engines reach the threshold temperature of 5000K, immediately shut down the engines and we'll coast with inertia. I have a bad feeling about that ship with its weird energy spikes."

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Commander Averis sat in his small fighter pilot seat marveling over the magnificent and complete destruction of his fleet as well as grieving, not for the hundreds of Turian lives lost, but for the lost chance of dishing out some serious pain to these meddling \_interlopers\_. He made a vow to return and deliver swift and absolute vengeance against them. But for now in his tiny fighter, he stood no chance against the might of the enemy fleets so he turned the ship around towards the Mass Relay, as he knew the Citadel would debrief him on these new developments.

After a few minutes of uneventful flight, Averis' ship was sent on its seconds-long journey to the Citadel.

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Schmidt kept his eyes locked on the tactical display that showed the frigate behind them. It seemed to follow their movements with uncanny accuracy and precision, every time Schmidt would try to evade, the frigate would remain on their tail. After a minute of playing cat-and-mouse, the frigate seemed to flash white and the space around it seemed to ripple. All of a sudden a brilliant explosion of light momentarily saturated the rear cameras and the enemy frigate seemed to collapse into nothing. Expanding outward was a ripple in space-time itself which caused the \_Corinth\_ to literally \_stretch

\_and\_ contract\_ as the gravity wave passed through the ship. Everyone fell unconscious and all power in the ship was cut.

The last thing that Schmidt heard was Lysander's wavering voice, "Hull failure, all systems on emergency standby mode... Reactors shut down... Leaking coolant... \_Error state\_..."

**\*\*OCTOBER 17, 2609. SHANXI CDF BASE ALPHA, INFIRMARY WING.\*\***

Captain Schmidt woke up in a very clean room with silver walls and a glass wall on one side. He looked around as he lay in bed and noticed medical equipment connected to his body. A platinum blonde woman clad in a white hospital outfit adorned with the single silver bar of a Lieutenant Junior Grade appeared at the glass wall. She was young enough to be Schmidt's daughter but she seemed to command a lot of respect amongst the staff.

She opened the metal door and walked in the room, when she came to the bed she stood at attention and saluted Schmidt. Schmidt tried to return her salute, but could only do it halfway since there was an IV line attached to his arm.

The doctor began, "Captain? I am Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski," Schmidt raised one eyebrow at the doctor's last name. "You've been unconscious since the \_Corinth \_was damaged and brought to Shanxi for repair and refit procedures. Apart from that, I've found no significant internal injuries other than evidence of slight hydrostatic shock^ to your brain and other internal organs. Fortunately we began treating it early before complications would have had a chance to take hold. I recommend that you remain here in the infirmary for the next three days so we can evaluate the extent of the trauma to your body and whether it would have lasting effects. Your crew received similar injuries which raises concern of their conditions for continued service in the CDF."

Schmidt took on an expression of shock at the doctor's words, but he asked, "What's become of my ship?"

Wierzbowski hung her head for a moment and replied, "It would be better if Admiral Hackett and General Williams told you themselves..." She motioned at the door and two men walked in. They had so many ribbons and medals pinned on their uniforms that Schmidt couldn't help but feel awed at the two famous officers standing before him.

Schmidt tried to salute but General Williams said, "No need Captain." Schmidt sat up straight in his bed anyway and was ready to take the news.

Admiral Hackett was the one in charge of Operation RAPTOR, which was the operation which destroyed the powerful Vega pirate organization and brought its leaders to justice. General Williams was in charge of planetary operations in RAPTOR and Operation SICKLE, which was the expedition against the Covenant remnants after they had attacked a Sangheili colony in 2599. The only Covenant species that didn't remain hostile were the Unggoy and the Mgalekgolo; the former signed a peace treaty with the Sangheili and UNSC shortly after the Great War and reaffirmed the treaty upon the founding of the Confederation. Even though CUS officials sent invitations to the Unggoy, they politely declined preferring the simple life on their planet away

from the troubles of the galaxy.

The Lekgolo at first remained distant from the UNSC but maintained diplomatic relations with the Sangheili until the founding of the CUS, at which they decided to join the new alliance as a provisional member. Full membership was awarded in the year 2600 in return for their service during Operation SICKLE. Now the Lekgolo comprise a tiny but important proportion of the CUS population, as they are invaluable for duties that Sangheili and Humans were ill-suited for.

Admiral Hackett approached the foot of Schmidt's bed and said, "Schmidt, the Corinth was hit by a gravity wave caused by a singularity that was produced when the frigate that was chasing you went critical. The ship sustained near-catastrophic damage from being stretched and squeezed by the wave, but thanks to the quick thinking of your ship's AI you were all saved from certain destruction. Unfortunately Lysander's AI matrix was destroyed by the wave. We have to restore Lysander from a redundant copy stored in the CDF database."

Schmidt raised his eyebrows and asked, "A copy?"

Hackett answered, "Yes, every AI has a series of redundant copies stored in highly secure databases. However Lysander's latest backup is six days old."

Schmidt looked downcast for a second, "He won't remember."

"No he won't. I'm sorry Captain."

"How long will the Corinth be out of commission?" Schmidt was eager to get back into action as soon as possible.

Hackett said in a grim tone, "The Corinth will be out of commission for two weeks. It requires extensive repairs and refit for all sections and systems."

Schmidt sat there processing the information for a few moments and sighed. Hackett continued, "All things considered, you're grounded for at least two weeks. I'll keep you updated on an hourly basis of how the repair is progressing if you want."

Schmidt replied, "I'd appreciate that sir."

General Williams started, "There is a distinct possibility that these aliens might return with greater numbers and even attempt an invasion of Shanxi. With Admiral Hackett's approval, I'd like for you to take command of all aerial forces as well as all naval personnel on Shanxi, in addition to your current command of the Shanxi Defense Fleet."

Schmidt replied, "Yes General, I'm your man!"

Williams chuckled, "Easy Captain, you still need to listen to your doctor." He smiled at Wierzbowski as they walked out of the room, and Schmidt did a half salute as they left.

Wierzbowski checked Schmidt's IVs and said, "Sir, if you need anything just press the call button on the armrest." She walked out



of the room afterward. Schmidt decided to get some rest.

**\*\*253:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. THE CITADEL PRESIDIUM, COUNCIL CHAMBER.\*\***

The Citadel Council was the most powerful political entity in the galaxy, imposing their rule upon trillions of denizens of highly diverse species. Since the Citadel was rediscovered by the Asari almost 3800 years ago, more and more species had joined the Citadel over time. The Asari ruled the Citadel alone for more than a millennium until first contact with the Salarrians approximately 2500 years ago. The Asari uplifted the Salarrians into prominence, and they received a second Council seat to rule as equals to Asari. Since then Asari-Salarrian rule spread across the galaxy until they encountered an extremely war-like species called the Krogan.

The Krogan at first were loyal to the Citadel until their population grew so high that they had to expand onto colonies owned by other species, causing a diplomatic meltdown and shattering the tenuous peace that held the Citadel species together. Soon full-scale war broke out with the full fury of the Krogan hordes unleashed upon the Citadel races, causing billions of deaths.

The Turians, a highly militaristic species encountered by the Citadel several decades before, were tasked with deploying a Salarrian-made mutagen that would sterilize virtually every Krogan that lived at the time and any Krogan born after. To prevent extinction, the bioweapon was tailored to allow very limited breeding, thus staving off total extinction but causing a fast decline in the Krogan population due to their war-like nature. In gratitude for their service to the Citadel and recognizing their nigh-unparalleled military prowess, the Turians were offered a seat in the Council itself, an unprecedented move for a relatively new species.

Peace was restored and maintained for millennia, the galaxy rebuilt and the Citadel races entered a golden age. Approximately 350 years ago the peace was threatened by a technologically advanced species called the Quarians. The Quarians were a peaceful species, but in their hubris they created a new race of AI's called the Geth. The Geth collective processing power grew to the extent that the programs began to question their role in the universe and whether they had souls. The Quarians were horrified at these questions, so they resolved to destroy every last Geth platform and wipe their programming. The Geth acted in self-defense causing war to break out once again, but the Citadel chose to distance themselves from the conflict by expelling the Quarians from their embassy, thus severing diplomatic relations. Eventually the Geth managed to evict the Quarians from their homeworld as well as all their colonies, forcing them to live a vagrant's existence aboard a massive fleet of ships.

Apart from the ongoing Quarian-Geth War, the Citadel races would continue to live in relative peace until now...

Commander Averis strode into the lofty, exquisitely decorated Presidium Council chamber. When he would pass any Turian, they would quickly turn the opposite way or look upon him with disgust. But Averis didn't care for the proclivities of other Turians where he is concerned. When he arrived at the dais before the Council itself, he stood at attention as he waited for them to address him.

Councilor Sparatus was the first to speak, albeit in a noticeably condescending tone, "Ah, Commander Averis. I see you've made it back in one piece, however your fleet did not... Care to explain?"

Averis stiffened as he replied, "Yes Councilors, when my fleet arrived in the Relay 314 system we were taken by surprise by an unknown species. My fleet of seven ships originally came up against a tiny fleet of four ships, however the leading ship was about the same size as the Destiny Ascension," All three councilors gasped in shock at this. Averis continued, "When they refused to respond to my communications, we went into a firing position but they fired first." Averis knew this was a blatant lie but he craved war and revenge for his humiliation. "The large ship was able to not only destroy, but obliterate one of my frigates in one shot. They seem to use similar weapons technology to us, except for the fact that Element Zero was not detected in any way, shape, or form in any of the ships or even in the system."

Councilor Tevos asked, "How is this possible? Element Zero is the basis for all advanced technology that we know of..."

Councilor Valern interjected, "Yes Councilor, that we know of. Who's to say that this new species has even heard of Element Zero at all? It sounds like they use a technology completely alien to us, which is troubling indeed."

Councilor Tevos nodded in agreement at Valern, and then changed the subject, "You said your fleet originally came up against four ships? Were there reinforcements?"

Averis answered, "Yes Councilor, a large fleet of ships of a completely different design came out of the relay and cut off our escape route. The lead ship in that fleet was... massive. It was over half the size of the Citadel itself!"

The Council was taken aback. A ship that was almost 30 kilometers long? Impossible.

Voices were heard mumbling in the background behind Averis as he continued with his account, "The new fleet proceeded to annihilate the remains of my fleet by firing some sort of powerful energy weapon. When the light cleared, my fleet was gone... as if it never existed at all."

Councilor Sparatus was the first to speak, "By the Spirits! If you were someone else, I would have ordered an immediate psychological examination. Averis, your reputation within the Hierarchy may be... tainted, but you know how to get things done."

Councilor Tevos added, "Indeed. This new development has me greatly concerned, more so than anything in my long life. Due to the new species' unprovoked aggression, I recommend that we dispatch Fleets 14, 19, and 37 as well as a full contingent of ground personnel." Averis smiled inwardly, for all this was a result of his lie. Now he would experience glory in battle at long last.

Councilor Sparatus' mandibles clicked in anticipation as he said, "I know the perfect person for the job. I've served with him before during a Geth attack on one of our colonies twenty years ago. Desolas

Arterius." Averis' attention was fixed upon Sparatus at the mention of that name as the Councilor continued, "And you Commander Averis, shall take the position of his second-in-command, effective immediately."

Councilors Tevos and Valern simultaneously added, "I concur with this resolution."

Councilor Sparatus said to Averis, "Commander, you know what to do. Dismissed."

All three councilors stood up as Averis bowed and backed away from the dais. They proclaimed, "Let it be known that on this day, we shall resolve to ascertain the nature of this new threat and if necessary, subdue it. This Council is adjourned." Everyone in the Council chamber cheered as the councilors sat back in their seats.

Tevos whispered to Valern out of earshot of Councilor Sparatus, "We have thus unleashed war once more upon us. This new threat of a powerful unknown faction bothers me greatly."

Valern nodded and replied, "I will immediately dispatch STG agents to the Relay 314 system to learn more about this new foe."

Little did anyone know that Averis' wicked plan had just succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. War will rock the galaxy once more and cull the weak from the strong.

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. CDF SHANXI COMMAND HQ.\*\***

The Shanxi Command HQ was always a hub of activity, with no downtime even at nighttime. General Williams was hunched over a desktop display showing the system and all ships within, and on another display it showed the positions and status of all CDF units stationed on Shanxi. General Williams took out a Cuban-style cigar and put it in his mouth. He lamented that he couldn't light it, due to CDF regulations about lighting a combustible object inside a CDF facility. Regardless, the presence of the cigar in his mouth provided much-needed relief from the intense anxiety he was feeling prior. His aide, a Sangheili Ultra named Covun Felsar, appeared in front of the General. He saluted and then turned his attention to the display in front of Williams.

The display in front of him suddenly flashed red, indicating a priority message coming in, so he hit the Accept option on the dialog box in the middle of the blood-red display. The message made his heart skip a beat, "Shanxi Command, this is Remote Station Alpha. We've got incoming! My God it's an invasion force..." The message cut off abruptly, presumably due to the station going dark as per CDF protocol.

The display flashed once more, indicating another priority message. Williams accepted it and listened to the audio recording, "Shanxi Command, this is the Pasadena. This invasion fleet is huge, we count 300 ships so far. They took out the Bronco with one huge salvo of mass accelerator rounds a few minutes ago... I was able to evade them and am currently on a vector for Shanxi. Hold on... now counting 400 ships. I repeat 400 ships! God help us."

Williams keyed his COMM for Schmidt and said, "We've got massive incoming. I need you here yesterday."

Felsar said calmly, "We will stand fast, General. I have faith in your leadership." Felsar's mandibles lined up in the Sangheili version of a "smile" expression as he rested his hand on the General's shoulder.

Williams looked up at the towering Sangheili and replied, "I hope your faith won't be wasted on me."

\_\*\*That's all for now.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Averis seems like a real piece of work, doesn't he? Wait until you all learn where his loyalties \*\*\_\*\*truly \*\*\_\*\*lie.\*\*\_

\_\*\*The big showdown at Shanxi WILL be in the next chapter. And I'm hoping to post that within a week unlike this chapter which was delayed for a month! :O\*\*\_

\_\*\*Following Shanxi we'll hopefully start to get into the meat of the story, so bear with me.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Definition: \*\*\_

\_\*\*Gravity wave: A distortion in space-time caused by the interaction with or disturbance of an object with extremely powerful gravity, such as a black hole or neutron star. Gravity waves usually, in theory, form when two (super)massive black holes are just about to merge. This can be among the most powerful and the most frightening phenomena in the known universe.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Hydrostatic shock: A traumatic injury to an organ caused by pressure waves produced by cavitation. Usually hydrostatic shock is a product of a gunshot wound as the bullet passes through the water-filled tissues of the body, however this cavitation can be produced by other sources. \*\*\_

#### 4. Showdown at Shanxi

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT.\*\*

\_\*\*A few things I want to make clear first:\*\*\_

\_\*\*According to one reviewer I am making the Council highly susceptible to the deceptions of Averis. This is by design and you'll discover how he was easily able to manipulate them in this chapter. \*\*\_

\_\*\*Another reviewer has made the point of the Reapers not being interested in the Halo Array as it would destroy the fresh genetic material they need to "reproduce". However I have a slightly different system in mind for them. The Catalyst is practically the most powerful AI in the universe; with the collective processing power of trillions of Reapers at its disposal, I'm sure that the Catalyst would have found another way to create new Reapersâ€¦ \*\*\_

\_\*\*Now, on with the chapter!\*\*\_

## **\*\*CHAPTER 3: SHOWDOWN AT SHANXI\*\***

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609: THE \*\*\_\*\*SUBLIME TRANSCENDENCE. \*\*\_\*\* IN ORBIT ABOVE SHANXI.\*\***

Fleet Master Cadram's attention was fixed on a tactical display that showed the positions of the enemy fleet. He could scarcely believe the fact that all this time, there was another galactic power here all along, and that it must be a great power to have marshaled this huge fleet. The Fleet Master's second-in-command came up behind Cadram and said, "It will be seven hours before the rest of the CDF can muster a fleet sufficient enough to counter the enemy. Now this will be a glorious battle!"

The Fleet Master asked, "What about 7th Fleet? They are perhaps a half hour's jump away."

The XO replied, "That won't be enoughâ€¦ The enemy's numbers are just too great."

The Fleet Master grunted in agreement. Even though the enemy ships were much smaller and presumably easier to destroy than CDF ships, he could not afford to underestimate them. The display showed at least eighty ships larger than 500 meters including twelve above 800 meters.

A communications officer announced, "Incoming message from Shanxi Command." Cadram's display changed to show the message, which was in both audio and text formats. Cadram elected to choose the audio version and listened intently.

"Fleet Master, this is General Williams. We've got incoming planetside right now; about 650 dropships are projected to touch down around New Roanoke within nine minutes. I expect this will be the initial wave, so we'll be dug in here. I've received word from Admiral Harmon that 7th Fleet will be here in 43 minutes with 30 ships. Until then we're on our own."

Cadram said with a hint of anticipation, "It is decided then. We shall hold them here and send our warriors to the surface to assist our allies."

The XO asked, "How much are you willing to commit?"

"All that can be spared."

"By your will Fleet Master."

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE.\*\***

"WE'VE GOT INCOMING, UP HIGH!" shouted one of the soldiers standing guard near the gun emplacement. Corporal Rodriguez fiddled with his MA-59 rail weapon system and his earpiece; something he'd do when he was nervous.

"Hey buddy, just stick with me and I'll make sure we both make it out of this in one piece." Corporal Rodriguez looked around for the source of that voice and saw his longtime friend Cpl Alexandrovic running toward him.

Alexandrovic continued, "I'll make sure you get home to Susanna after all, someone has to care for you." Rodriguez pushed his friend away and motioned skyward. The dropships were just becoming visible to them.

The surrounding AA batteries lit up the afternoon sky like the hundreds of thousands of stars shimmering above every night. One AA missile battery scored a hit when the targeted dropship burst into flame and dropped down away from formation. Even with the AA batteries saturating the sky, the dropships seemed unstoppable. To Rodriguez and Alexandrovic, the fight of their lives was about to begin.

-000-000-

The CDF airbase hangar was a flurry of activity as pilots were priming and scrambling their F-75 Stiletto atmospheric jet fighters. The Stiletto fighters were created and launched in 2596 to replace the aging Sabre and Skyhawk fighters. Even though the Rapier singleship space fighters were capable of atmospheric operation, the Stilettos were far more maneuverable in an atmosphere since they were designed for it.

Each Stiletto was armed with twin ML-22 Pulse Laser cannons along with an internal magazine of eight 115lb. Skyhammer air-to-air missiles as well as four 320lb. Cestus air-to-ground penetrating missiles.

Major Michael Grimes strapped himself into the cramped seat of his Stiletto fighter as the canopy closed above him. He thumbed the biometric reader next to his fighter's instrument panel which caused the display in front of him to activate. The display showed the view in front of the fighter, since the design obstructed direct view of the outside space. Various information readouts and LIDAR spatial data populated the display as well. Grimes vectored the engines downward for takeoff and was preparing to increase the throttle.

A voice came through on the squad COM channel, "Squadrons A through F, you are cleared for takeoff. Give 'em hell Marines!"

Grimes opened the throttle and the fighter streaked out of the hangar at top speed, pinning him into his seat.

The six squadrons of Stilettos banked right and went into a steep dive in their final intercept course for the incoming dropships. The AA fire that was saturating the sky had just stopped as the fighters swooped in upon the unsuspecting dropships.

A new voice came through the COM, "Stiletto squadrons, this Captain Schmidt. General Williams has given me overall command of all aerial assets on Shanxi."

One of the pilots complained, "Oh come on! This is BS why the hell have we got a bloody swabbie in charge now."

Grimes ordered, "Stow it Marine and suck it up."

Captain Schmidt continued, "The ROE is fire at will, I repeat Fire at will!"

Another voice broke in, "Yea boys! Let's penetrate and annihilate!"

The COM channel was filled with metal music as well. Grimes rolled his eyes and activated his missiles. Unauthorized use of CDF communications equipment was punishable by a maximum of ten years in the brig, but in these circumstances it was almost welcomed as nothing came through from Command.

Grimes armed and fired one of the Skyhammer missiles. The missile streaked forward on a jet of fire and connected with one of the dropships, tearing it in half and shredding the rest. Grimes could've sworn he saw a body or two fall out of the wrecked ship as it went down. The other Stilettos found their targets and the dropships began dropping out of the sky like flies. But missiles were limited and there were a \_lot \_of dropships.

Several minutes later, after taking down a few more dropships himself, Grimes said into the COM with a grim tone, "This is Major Grimes to Air Command. We've engaged the enemy dropships and took out about thirty-four of them, but at least five hundred have made it past us and will be touching down shortly. Unfortunately we will be forced to disengage and resupply soon."

"Alright son, you and your guys have done a real good job. I'll buy y'all a beer when you get back to the coop."

All of a sudden the lock-on alarm sounded in the fighter, which indicated that someone was on him. Half of the display changed to show the direction that the lock-on signal originated. He saw a sleek grey ship above bearing down upon him. He grabbed the controls and went into a hard left to try and shake the lock. Grimes didn't know what types of weapons these aliens used, but he wasn't about ready to take a chance. The enemy fighter kept on his tail and the lock-on alarm continued to show on his display, with the NAV computer calculating and showing possible evasion vectors.

Grimes said on the squad COM, "I've got a bandit on my tail, trying to shake him. Need assist."

"This is S-16, I have you on scope, moving to intercept." The rear view on the tactical display now showed another Stiletto fighter moving in behind the enemy fighter. A few moments later the Stiletto lit up the enemy fighter with his pulse lasers, taking him out.

Major Grimes sighed with relief as he said, "Hey, thanks for the assist. I owe you one."

The reply came through, "Yea you do, sir. See ya back at base."

The trip back to base was otherwise uneventful. Grimes would get some chow while he waited for the base crew to rearm and refuel the fighters. All in all a twenty minute wait, but soon they'll be right back at it. Grimes got out of his fighter and went into the chow hall. It was filled with pilots and base personnel who had all their attention focused on the extranet displays on the walls, all documenting the invasion. The displays showed the dropships coming down into the atmosphere as well as the invasion fleet in orbit.

A minute later the display shifted to the Stilettos shooting some of them down. That particular scene elicited cheers from everyone in the chow hall as the display changed to show a female reporter in the New Roanoke central plaza, and the reporter said, "and this is Reporter Lauren Anderson bringing you the latest in the crisis at Shanxi, live from the source."

As he was eating, Major Grimes noticed someone standing at his side. He looked and saw the muscular frame of Colonel Travis Mackensen.

Grimes stood up and saluted his superior, which caused the Colonel to chuckle and say, "At ease son. Your boys did a hell of a job takin' on those dropships. I know most of them went through, but I'll bet that Command appreciates what y'all did up there." He patted Grimes on the back and walked away.

A few minutes later the base intercom boomed, "Attention all Stiletto pilots, scramble your jets." In an instant, everyone got up from their seats, filed out of the chow hall, and began to prep their fighters. Grimes said under his breath, "Right back into it."

-ooo-ooo-

General Williams was hunched over the desktop display which now showed personnel lists and positions of all ground and air units. His Sangheili aide was not present, as he was coordinating the ground forces in the field. His display changed to show a fleet of dropships landing in the northern residential area and offloading alien troops. The display's corresponding camera was too far away to get a good look at the alien soldiers, and it didn't help that they were obscured by smoke drifting from a nearby house.

Williams said into his Comm unit, "This is Command to all tank units in Sector G, you've got incoming into your area, get your tanks ready and roll out the welcome mat for our guests."

Shanxi's tank units were basically equal to a token garrison, but they also had a handful of the new M-85 Phalanx tanks. The new tanks were armed with the powerful M-139 70mm rail cannon, two mortar launchers, and two pulse laser cannons with overlapping fields of fire; altogether combining to make a powerful war machine.

The tank commander replied, "Yessir! We'll bring some thunder down on them."

-ooo-ooo-

Colonel Andrei "Andy" Zhukov was in command of the 23rd Armored Cavalry Division, which was the only tank division currently deployed on Shanxi. He had his first taste of a tank battle during Operation RAPTOR and got his first command assignment during SCYTHE. He boasted to his crew on a regular basis that he knew more about tanks than he did about his own wife. Because of his name, his relatives had claimed numerous times that they were descended from the famous WWII Soviet field marshal himself, although the Colonel had denied it constantly.



Colonel Zhukov gathered his crew together in the tank depot and said to them in his somewhat noticeable Russian accent, "Alright boys and girls, we've got incoming enemy dropships about to touch down right on top of us. The General has tasked yours truly with rolling out the 65mm welcome mat and inviting our guests for dinner."

A crewman asked, "What are we expecting?" Zhukov knew his men were nervous. An unknown enemy rolling down a street that some of them have probably lived on at one point in their lives must have been like getting the sanctity of your home violated by some burglar.

The crewman continued, "I mean we got a load of alien uglies coming in to fight us on our own turf, with our families close by."

Zhukov replied, "Don't worry Davis, our tanks will give them the shock and awe treatment for good measure. Let's roll out."

Everyone got into their tanks and Zhukov climbed into his own. The displays inside the tank instantly came on and showed various status indicators overlaid on a 180 degree view out the front of the tank. He turned on the tank's repulsor engine, which caused him to feel weightless for a second. Even though he had received simulation training to get him to learn the Phalanx's new repulsor engine, no simulation was a substitute for the real thing.

The tanks moved out of the depot and entered the Sgt. Avery Johnson Memorial Expressway, which was the main artery of ground transportation into and out of New Roanoke. Zhukov panned his display's angle upwards, which showed enemy fighters slugging it out with the Stiletto fighters along with additional enemy dropships scattering and landing in various places throughout the city. Zhukov said over unit COM, "Looks like the flyboys are busy with our guests."

"Hell yea sir!"

"Yea, those guys get all the glamour while we get all the hard work."

"Don't forget they also get laid all the time while we gotta beat it to extranet porno."

"Hey Mendez, stow the BS and pay attention to your lousy driving!"

The COM channel dissolved into laughter for a moment then fell silent. Zhukov smiled at the COM banter as he returned the display's view angle back to the default position.

The tanks continued along the expressway for about five minutes until getting off at the exit leading to Sector G. In that direction a huge cloud of smoke was already high in the air. Zhukov said on unit COM, "Get off here and go toward that cloud of smoke. Do not fire unless fired upon!" On his display all the unit acknowledgement lights winked green.

The tanks slowly moved down the street, but so far there was no enemy contact. Zhukov was beginning to wonder where they were until he caught sight of some alien soldiers milling around next to a bus. They were man-sized aliens wearing distinctive armor with crests on

their backs, and they wielded small weapons that somewhat resembled the old MA5B assault rifles from the days of the Great War.

Zhukov said, "Eyes ahead, picking up five hostiles 160 meters up the street. See the bus? Stay sharp, there may be more."

The acknowledgement lights winked green. Zhukov aimed his tank's turret towards the oblivious enemy hostiles and waited for the excuse to light them up like a Christmas tree.

He didn't have to wait long, as the aliens noticed them within a few moments of their arrival. They curiously approached the tanks part way, then suddenly opened fire. Their rounds made a deafening noise as they pinged off the Phalanx's advanced titanium composite battleplate.

Zhukov yelled, "Return fire, return fire!" All of the tanks opened up, Zhukov fired his M-139 cannon at the bus down the street since he had just seen a few more alien soldiers rushing to join the fight. The bus blew up in a huge fireball which cut down four of the aliens and probably wounded some more. He felt the blast from inside his tank and remarked over unit COM, "Oh my God, these busses are like bombs when they blowâ€¦!"

"No sir, I think someone had a little surprise put in that bus."

"Yea, I'll bet that a lot of these vehicles are rigged."

Zhukov grunted in agreement and ordered, "Watch your fire. If you see a juicy opportunity, don't hesitate. ROE is fire at will from here on out. Stay sharp."

Zhukov's COM squawked and the voice of General Williams came through, "I have a priority target for you. The enemy is offloading heavy vehicles about five minutes due east of where you're at, on grid 5 by 5. Get in there and give 'em a reception."

Zhukov replied, "Yes sir, we're on our way."

-ooo-ooo-

The Sublime Transcendence and the rest of 31st Fleet was in high orbit above Shanxi, waiting for the enemy invasion fleet to make a move. Fleet Master Cadram was standing on the dais in the control room studying the surrounding tactical displays which showed the entirety of the enemy fleet, all 415 of them.

His own fleet consisted of only nineteen ships, including the 28km long Sublime Transcendence; whereas the enemy fleet's largest ships were a small fraction of that size, the maximum being approximately one kilometer in length. The display shifted to show the largest ship in the enemy armada, which had a highly unusual design. It looked somewhat like a cross shape and it took on a subtle pink hue in the sunlight from GV 2566.

The Fleet Master turned around to face the crowd of Sangheili gathered before him, "Stand with me this day, my brothers, as we engage these invaders in glorious battle! Their fleet outnumbers us thirty to one. It shall be an even fight!"

This elicited cheers from all the Sangheili officers in the control room as the Fleet Master continued, "Let us make ready for battle. Let them quake in fear when they behold our mighty ships and when we fill their hearts with our cleansing fire. Let them despair when we prevail!"

All the Sangheili cheered again, and this time the noise was deafening. The Fleet Master turned to face the main tactical display as he said, "Make your course for the enemy fleet and prepare for battle."

Every Sangheili in the control room said, "By your will Fleet Master!"

\*\*253:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM. BRIDGE OF TURIAN DREADNOUGHT \*\*\_\*\*TRASIUS. \*\*\_

Fleet Commander Desolas Arterius stood on the bridge of the \_Trasius\_. His second in command, Commander Averis, was on his way planetside to orchestrate the invasion itself. He had no trust in Averis, thinking him to be an overzealous megalomaniac; but by being a lifelong soldier he felt compelled to follow the Council's orders down to the letter.

A Nav officer announced, "We've got an enemy fleet on course to us. You should see the size of the lead ship Commander." Arterius' tactical display changed to show an image of the leading ship.

"By the Spiritsâ€¦!"

The XO said, "Commander. We'll need to focus our fire on that lead ship."

"Very well. Plot an intercept course and prepare for battle." Arterius stared intently at his main display.

The \_Trasius\_ and the surrounding ships turned to face the oncoming enemy fleet.

-ooo-ooo-

The two fleets approached each other in the cold void of space and the tension between them almost made the void seem even colder and darker than it was. The massive \_Sublime Transcendence\_ angled upwards slightly to give its energy projectors a better field of fire against the oncoming alien armada.

The \_Trasius\_ was the first to fire, unloading a salvo of four magnetically accelerated 38kg slugs at the \_Sublime Transcendence\_.

Fleet Master Cadram ordered, "Incoming fire, focus power to bow shields."

The incoming slugs took only a couple of seconds to find their marks, pounding the Sangheili Supercarrier's shields. The impacts produced dazzling flashes of light every time a slug hit, but the shields held.

The Fleet Master asked, "Damage report?"

"No damage detected in any sections, shields holding at 80%." announced a Sangheili Ultra bridge officer.

Cadram said to the bridge officers, "We can take the punishment from only a few, but we cannot let them get the chance to focus their fire with the rest of their fleet. Return fire!"

The \_Sublime Transcendence\_ launched four incandescent plasma torpedoes that seemed to radiate many colors like light refracted through a prism. The huge spear-like plasma torpedoes lazily drifted forward for a second then, as if being grabbed by some unseen force, they darted straight for the \_Trasius\_.

"By the Spirits!" gasped a shocked Commander Arterius, who then bellowed as loudly as he could, "TAKE EVASIVE ACTION NOW!"

The \_Trasius\_ took a sharp turn to its right, desperately trying to avoid the oncoming spears that seemed to be composed of fire straight from hell. An Asari frigate moved forward in an effort to perhaps take the hit or throw the torpedoes off their trajectory.

Commander Arterius shouted into the Fleet COM, "Captain Arellia, I \_order\_ you to return to your position immediately!"

"Not a chance sir." said the voice from the other end. The plasma torpedoes changed their trajectories to the Asari frigate, the crew of which were confident that their kinetic barriers would somehow stave off the impact to come.

"Give me a view of the \_Shi'ari\_ \_right now!" shouted Commander Arterius.

"Yessir!"

The Commander's tactical display changed to show the doomed Asari frigate now silhouetted by the brilliant light from the incoming plasma torpedo. Arterius could only look away as one of the torpedoes instantly vaporized the \_Shi'ari\_ and saturated the display with white static as the EM pulse temporarily disabled the cameras. When the feed was restored about thirty seconds later, nothing remained of the frigate and its gallant crew.

The other three torpedoes found their targets in the form of one Salarian frigate, a Turian cruiser, and a Turian frigate. All three were effortlessly vaporized within seconds, thus proving themselves to be no match against the plasma torpedoes.

Arterius stood up in front of his chair and looked at his bridge officers, who all wore expressions of pure, unadulterated shock and horror.

\_What could we do against such hellish firepower?\_

Arterius saluted the fallen crew of the obliterated ships and sat back down. He finally said, "We cannot hope to stand against firepower of this magnitude. Bring up the rest of the fleet to this position. That ship is THE priority target."

The rest of the Citadel fleet began to group up around the \_Trasius\_. This was to prove a fatal mistake for the blissfully unaware Citadel fleet, as the plasma torpedoes were only the opening act for the display of the CDF's might.

"The enemy has just sealed their fate. Prepare to fire energy projectors!" ordered an excited Fleet Master Cadram.

The \_Sublime Transcendence\_ began to glow with a purplish light on its undersideâ€|

The Fleet Master said under his breath, "The enemy doesn't realize the horrors that they are about to experience." He then addressed the Weapons Officer, "Aim just to the right of that large ship in the center."

"It shall be done Fleet Master!"

"Energy projectors ready to fire on your command."

The Fleet Master thundered without hesitation, "\*\*\*FIRE!\*\*\*"

The \_Sublime Transcendence\_ fired a brilliant, narrow purple beam of intense energy that crossed the distance between the two fleets in an instant.

"Commander, picking up intense energy and radiation spikes from the large ship in the enemy fleet." shouted one of the nervous bridge officers aboard the \_Trasius\_.

Arterius could only guess what that meant, but his questions were suddenly answered when his display showed that the large enemy ship fired a brilliant beam of intense purple light that seemed to split space in two. Arterius felt a searing heat wash over the right side of his body, as did everyone else inside the bridge.

Klaxons sounded throughout the ship as one of the bridge officers announced, "Critical temperatures detected throughout the starboard side of the ship."

Arterius squinted at the brilliance of the beam, even though the displays had automatically set themselves to their lowest brightness settings. The same bridge officer continued, "Commander! Sections 14 to 29 areâ€| gone! They've literally vaporized."

Arterius was now panicking. He asked, "We were hit by the beam?"

"It was a glancing hit, sir." That floored Arterius.

"What of the other ships off the starboard side?"

"Theyâ€| They'reâ€| allâ€| gone sir. So far I'm counting twenty-nine ships missing in action."

However they really weren't missing in action, they had been obliterated by that \_impossibly\_ powerful energy weapon. Arterius couldn't believe what his senses beheldâ€| That light, the alarms, the bridge officers' heart-wrenching announcementsâ€| and that \_heat\_!

Another bridge officer spoke up, "The ship has taken tremendous damage. I've already sealed off the breached sections and decks, and the atmospheric decompression has been dealt with. However our engines have sustained serious damage and the drive core is not functioning properly."

Arterius knew the risks of operating with a malfunctioning drive core, and the potential effects sent chills throughout his body.

"We must retreat and fight another day." he said with resignation and defeat evident in his voice.

"Sir?" asked a young Turian bridge officer.

Another bridge officer asked, "What of the ground forces and Commander Averis?"

Arterius said with a hint of regret, "Leave them, we're in no condition to contend with those ships."

"Yes sir."

Commander Arterius sighed in frustration and ordered, "Belay that. Tell the other ships to remain here but avoid ALL contact with the enemy for the time being. However \_we \_have no choice."

The \_Trasius \_limped for the Mass Relay that was over 90 AU away. It was going to be a long trip.

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. IN ORBIT ABOVE SHANXI. THE BRIDGE OF THE  
\*\*\_\*\*SUBLIME TRANSCENDENCE\*\*\_\*\*.\*\***

"We've done it Fleet Master! We have broken their fleet!" shouted a joyous Sangheili bridge officer.

Fleet Master Cadram himself could scarcely believe it. He had routed an enemy fleet that vastly outnumbered his own fleet almost single-handedly. However it was due to the "shock and awe" treatment he had meted out rather than any actual ship-to-ship fighting. He was almost disappointed that the aliens had not given him a real challenge.

"Prepare to deploy all available warriors to the surface." ordered Fleet Master Cadram.

-ooo-ooo-

"Let us prepare to take the battle to the enemy ourselves" shouted Field Master Kasu Moram.

All the heavily armed Sangheili soldiers geared up in their combat harnesses and checked their plasma rifles, energy swords, and grenades. They were ready.

Moram himself had no desire to use ranged weapons, for he reveled in the thrill of close combat with his dual energy swords. He wasn't above using grenades, as he had a half dozen attached to his combat harness' grenade slots. The Sangheili warriors then boarded the sixteen Phantom dropships that awaited them and sat in each seat. Everyone was silent in anticipation of the glorious battle that

awaited them.

Moram paced back and forth addressing the Sangheili that were listening with rapt attention, "We will be getting into the battle now. Our objectives are to assist our human allies and destroy all enemy units we come across. We will not take prisoners and we will show no mercy. Let's move out!"

All of the Sangheili warriors erupted in deafening battle cries as the Phantoms left the cavernous hangar bay of the \_Sublime Transcendence\_. Every Sangheili aboard the Phantom dropships must have been thinking the same thingâ€|

\_These invaders know not of death even if they see it before their faces. We will enlighten them.\_

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE. DEFENSE SECTOR G 5x5\*\***

The 23rd Armored Cavalry Division rolled along the streets of New Roanoke as they sped with all possible haste toward the priority target given by the General.

Colonel Zhukov signaled the unit to stop once they reached a shopping district. All the acknowledgement lights winked green. He panned the camera around to look at the buildings. The Pleiades Jewelry boutique was a shell of its former exquisite self, having been hit by enemy artillery a while back. Zhukov looked around the shopping center some more but saw no enemy units.

Zhukov said on COM, "No one's here. These buildings areâ€|"

The distinctive sound of the alien firearms discharging filled the air and the deafening pinging noise of the enemy rounds hitting the tank's armor began. Zhukov put the tank in reverse and backed up behind a large chunk of duracrete. Almost like maggots working their way out of meat, alien soldiers began coming out and firing at the tanks. Zhukov noticed that some of the enemy units were slender aliens with large black eyes, and they lacked body hair of any type. The new alien units were clad in white armor, and were armed with submachine gun-like weapons in one hand and a glowing orange wrist implement in the other.

A gout of fire erupted out from one alien's wrist-mounted device which caused Zhukov to take cover behind the duracrete block again. He knew the fire wouldn't affect his tank, but the aliens held the high ground, occupying a piece of a building's roof that was on the road. He wanted to draw them towards his unit. So far they seemed oblivious to the other tanks in Zhukov's unit, which was fortunate as they were taking up flanking positions.

Now there were over thirty alien soldiers in the shopping center plaza, all in cover behind various blocks of duracrete or destroyed vehicles. Zhukov selected the mortars on his display and aligned the aiming arc over the enemy's cover so the rounds would explode right behind them. Once he was satisfied with the trajectory, he pressed the fire command. Two popping noises came from behind him as the mortars lobbed two 90mm M-28 incendiary anti-personnel rounds downrange.

The new M-28 mortar rounds are a brilliant combination of

Covenant/Forerunner plasma technology and human ingenuity. Each round contains a magnetically compressed sphere of super-hot plasma that would release upon activation via a proximity sensor or timer. Upon release, the plasma would rapidly heat the surrounding air, thus making it expand and turning the area into a hellish inferno for a few moments. To prevent the round itself from melting, the plasma was insulated from the round casing by a vacuum. The M-28s first saw service during Operation SCYTHE and proved extremely effective as an anti-infantry weapon; as along with the obvious incineration of any unfortunate hostiles within its three meter area of effect, it also caused serious burns to any units within twelve meters as well as possible psychological breakdown. All in all, it found its niche as a go-to weapon for fighting entrenched enemy infantry.

The M-28s exploded downrange and engulfed the enemy with superheated plasma, causing any surviving alien units to flail around trying to extinguish their burning armor. The sight of this brought a grim smile to Zhukov's face. A quick scan with his tank's sensors revealed that while half the enemy force survived, they were in no condition to fight. He said into the COM, "Let's press on."

Sgt. Mendez replied, "Ain't no tanks here boss."

A nearby explosion proved him wrong.

**\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. THE CITADEL.\*\***

Commander Arterius walked at a brisk pace through the Presidium, as he'd been ordered to present himself before the Council immediately after his crippled ship docked at a Hierarchy repair facility.

As he walked along the Presidium grounds, he drew much attention from just about every civilian he saw, regardless of species. It was now common knowledge that there was first contact with a new, unknown species and that the famous Desolas Arterius was in charge of a fleet that was dispatched to "mediate" the first contact event. Of course that was the "official" storyâ€¦

Eventually he came to the elevator that led to the Council chambers. A group of well-dressed Salarian civilians filed out while staring at the Commander. He thought to himself,

\_Thank the Spirits that they don't know the entire truth.\_

Arterius got in the elevator and selected the only option available: the Council Chambers. He took a deep breath as the doors closed and the elevator began its agonizingly \_slow\_ ascent to its destination. Upon arrival he got out and noticed that the Council chambers were packed with civilians, C-Sec officers, military officers, and politicians; all from the various Citadel races that had embassies on the Citadel itself. He felt eyes on him and everyone became silent, so he looked up and saw that everyone in the chambers was looking at him.

When he came up to the dais, he stood at attention.

Councilor Tevos was the first to speak, "Commander Desolas Arterius. You are called here to answer for your perceived belligerence against a new species." Arterius was shocked beyond belief.



"While they had broken Citadel law regarding the activation of dormant relays, we've come to the consensus that they were ignorant of that law and that your actions were unjustly excessive. Pursuant to Citadel directive C-63-G, you have been found responsible of unfair and excessive force against an innocent species, of which the punishment is confinement in an appropriately secure facility for the rest of your life. Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

For a moment Commander Arterius was so stunned that he couldn't even speak at first. After a few seconds he began, "Honorable Councilors. It was by your orders that I led my fleet into battle against this new species. I have incontrovertible proof that this is the case."

Councilor Tevos interjected, "I have no memory of ever giving you any orders to go to war against an unknown species."

Both Councilor Sparatus and Valern added, "Neither do we."

Commander Arterius activated his Omni-tool and began transferring files that indicated that his orders were directly given to him by the Council itself. The files began appearing at each Councilor's displays as well as the large holographic projector to their right, for everyone to see.

Councilor Sparatus said with a hint of shock, "These files seem authentic, but we cannot know for sure until we have C-Sec analyze them. Until then, you will be confined to a C-Sec security cell. You will be brought back here as soon as possible so we can discuss your evidence further."

Two C-Sec officers, one a Turian with an orange eyepiece and the other an Asari, appeared behind Commander Arterius. They cuffed the Commander and led him away without a word.

When the Commander was gone, Councilor Tevos whispered to her fellow Councilors,

"The Commander's words make senseâ€¦ When Averis came and relayed his account to us, it felt like there was a subtle voice whispering to me in my headâ€¦ It was so subtle that, at first, I didn't notice it. But after Averis had left, the voice was no more. It felt as if a fog had descended upon my mind when he was here, and then lifted once he had gone."

Councilor Valern affirmed, "Yes, I noticed that too. It was certainly a very disturbing sensation. How could Averis do that? I have no clue."

Councilor Sparatus simply grunted in disbelief.

Councilor Tevos continued, "I don't know what he did, if he had a hypnotic or hallucinogenic agent smuggled into these very Chambers and circulated through the ventilation systemsâ€¦"

Councilor Sparatus interrupted, "That is impossible. There are spectroscopic scanners all over the place that are programmed to detect and alert us of any chemical contaminants present within the Chambers. Also the ventilation system here is completely isolated from anywhere else in the Citadel. There is no way that Averis could

have done any of that."

The same Turian C-Sec officer who led Commander Arterius away appeared before the Council again. He said with a very muted hint of contempt, "I am Officer Garrus Vakarian. How may I be of service Councilors?"

Councilor Tevos ordered, "You must analyze the files that Commander Arterius showed us. Tell us whether they're authentic and whether they've been edited or not."

Garrus replied simply, "It will be done Councilors."

A while later, Garrus had returned to C-Sec HQ and began to analyze the files. The final result was shocking. All the files were absolutely authentic and had never been tampered with. Garrus quickly forwarded a copy to the Council and saved the other on his Omni-tool. He rushed to the Council Chambers with his findings.

Once Garrus had arrived, Councilor Sparatus asked, "We've received your results just before you arrived, and I must say that I'm shocked."

Councilor Tevos said, "Officer Vakarian, we ask you to bring Commander Arterius before us as soon as possible."

Garrus replied, "Yes Councilors." He bowed and left.

After a while, Garrus returned with Commander Arterius, who was not wearing cuffs this time. Garrus backed away from the dais, leaving Arterius alone before the Council. He wasn't sure whether they would accept his files as being authentic or not even though he knew they were. Nevertheless he was very anxious to find out. He braced himself for their judgment.

Councilor Sparatus began, "Commander, we have reviewed your files and we have found them to be absolutely authentic and pristine." Arterius was again shocked but he was also greatly relieved.

Councilor Tevos said, "Yes, I cannot believe that Averis deceived us into unintentionally giving you orders to invade an unknown species' planet unprovoked. Averis has committed crimes of the highest magnitude and he will answer for them."

Councilor Sparatus proclaimed, "Commander Desolas Arterius. We, the Citadel Council, hold you exonerated from these charges that had been placed upon you and we shall have all mention of them struck from your record forthwith."

Commander Arterius replied, "I thank you Councilors, for seeing true justice being dispensed fairly."

Councilor Tevos stood up and addressed the crowd gathered near the dais, "I must ask everyone to leave these chambers immediately." All the civilians and military officers grumbled in frustration but began leaving in an orderly fashion.

Once all the crowd had left, Councilor Sparatus continued, "We would ask you to do something for us. You must return to the Relay 314 system, arrest Averis, and bring him back to the Citadel to face

judgment for his crimes."

Councilor Tevos added, "Also we must reach a diplomatic solution with the new faction against whom Averis had drawn us into a needless war with. And we must do this before it escalates into a crisis of a level unseen since the Krogan Rebellions."

Commander Arterius replied, "Yes Councilors. However I must ask for a new ship, for mine has sustained crippling damage in battle against one of the new species' mighty ships."

Councilor Sparatus thought for a moment and said with a slightly anticipatory tone, "Granted. While it won't be a Dreadnought like you want, it will get the job done." Councilor Sparatus' voice took on a hushed tone, "And not a word of this leaves these chambers. Are we clear on that Commander?"

"Crystal."

"Good, you are dismissed." said Councilor Sparatus.

Little did anyone know that Averis had spies all throughout the Citadel and that they had funneled this new information to him.

**\*\*253:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM. PLANETARY SUBJUGATION FORCE HQ.\*\***

Commander Averis was alone in his quarters. He had just received word that the Citadel Council was now aware of his machinations, and that Commander Arterius was on his way to apprehend him.

He walked to his table and discreetly attached a small device on the underside. He was confident that this device would erase all evidence of his crimes and that all suspicion would be thrown off him.

Averis drew out a curious looking black object from his pack and he held it before him. As he was holding it he began to marvel at its beauty, but he also began to feel a presence manifest within his mind as he held the mysterious object in front of him. This presence began to whisper to him, in a very subtle way.

Averis, you have served us well. All things are coming together as planned, and soon we shall return and bring forth the means of transcendence to all those who are willing to accept the truth. Now is not the time, so you must continue to prepare for our arrival. Before we leave you, we must mention that there is another organic like yourself in our service. You must join him and serve him€|\_

\*\*The plot thickens. By now it's probably obvious as to who Averis really serves.\*\*

\*\*I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, as it took me a good deal of work to type up in a convincing fashion. I hope you like my battle and dialog sequences especially.\*\*

\*\*I know that Desolas Arterius' role in this is significantly different from his canon role. Also I know I added Garrus into the story this early, which might make my fic appear to severely mess

with the canon timeline. All this is according to my grand design.  
\*\*\_

\_\*\*In the next chapter I'm going to finish up the Battle of Shanxi and get into the real meat of the story. However I will be out of town to visit family for the holidays, but I'll try my best to get another chapter uploaded in time for the holidays.\*\*\_

## 5. To War!

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\*

\_\*\*In this chapter, we'll be finishing up the Battle of Shanxi and then we'll be leaving Shanxi behind for another locale. I must also mention one more thingâ€¦| \*\*\_

\_\*\*There be Spartans! :O \*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER 4: TO WAR!\*\*

\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE. CDF SHANXI COMMAND HQ.\*\*

Night had fallen on New Roanoke a few minutes ago as General Williams returned from the field and studied the desktop tactical display some more. Another display flashed once, indicating a message just coming in. Williams checked the message and saw that it was a real-time message from Admiral Hackett himself, so he accepted it and listened.

"This is Admiral Hackett in command of Second Fleet to General Williams of CDF Shanxi Command."

General Williams replied, "This is Williams, what news do you have for us Admiral?"

"We're just slipping in with one hundred thirty ships as we speak. ETA is six minutes. We also have Seventh Fleet coming in via the Mass Relay. Altogether we'll be fielding 160 ships. What is the status of the enemy invasion fleet?"

Williams checked the desktop display for a second and replied, "Wow, surprised to see you guys here so early! Anyways the enemy fleet has lost thirty-four ships so far. They just got the hell beat out of them by the Sangheili in the 31st Fleet."

"What are our losses so far, both planetside and in space?"

Williams replied with a slighty remorseful tone, "We've lost 278 soldiers so far planetside. Also lost two ships, the \_Thomson\_ and the \_Bronco\_ with all hands lost for both. Based on crew manifests, about 1300 men and women."

"So about 1578 lost in total?"

"Yes Admiral. I can say with reasonable confidence that the enemy has paid dearly for these figures though."

The COM was silent for a few seconds until Admiral Hackett spoke in a

disturbingly quiet voice, "The enemy is about to bleed in torrents then. We're bringing in a "special package" for you General. Hackett out."

Just as the Admiral finished on his side, Covun Felsar had just entered the HQ and heard the last part of the message. He asked, "What is this special package he speaks of?"

A wicked smile formed on the General's face as he answered simply, "Spartans."

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. IN ORBIT ABOVE SHANXI.\*\***

In a section of space about 7000 kilometers away from the enemy invasion fleet, the void seemed to come alive with Slipspace portals as the Second Fleet arrived on the scene of battle.

Out of the 130 ships in Second Fleet, there were two massive Keyes-class Supercarriers, the \_Gungnir\_ and the \_Alexander Nevsky\_; as well as two mighty Cole-class Dreadnoughts, the \_Patton\_ and the \_Justinian\_.

Vice Admiral Steven Hackett was in overall command of the Fleet aboard his flagship \_Patton\_. Commanding the other three capital ships were Rear Admiral Oleg Petrovsky of the \_Gungnir\_, Rear Admiral James Horowitz of the \_Alexander Nevsky\_, and Rear Admiral Claude Lachance aboard the \_Justinian\_.

The rest of Second Fleet consisted of Dawn-class frigates, Ticonderoga-class destroyers, and Halcyon-II cruisers; all of which looked like toys next to the four mighty capital ships of Second Fleet.

The Cole-class Dreadnoughts were conceived in a collaborative project between ONI and the UNSC itself in 2563. They were to be based on the \_Infinity\_ but then the Cole-class Dreadnoughts were then redesigned to be a fully realized and much larger version of the test ship. \_The first Cole-class Dreadnought was the \_Washington\_, launched in 2574.

The Dreadnoughts were armed with a thousand Longbow missile pods, two advanced MAC cannons that could launch 750 ton ferric-tungsten slugs at 6% the speed of light, and an energy projector that surpassed the power of an equivalent Sangheili energy projector.

Like all of humanity's powerful new ships, the Dreadnoughts were also armed with the Praetorian point-defense system which used pulse lasers rather than the old autocannon system used prior, as well as extremely powerful shields based off the successfully tested Forerunner-based shields on the \_Infinity\_.

The Keyes-class Supercarriers were designed as being humanity's answer to the mighty Sangheili supercarriers, but when humanity allied itself with the Sangheili in 2577 the purpose of the Keyes-class Supercarriers changed from something to square off against the Sangheili to something to frighten any kind of enemy into submission. It didn't hurt that the Supercarriers were also humanity's largest ever vessels, measuring at 8.1 kilometers long and having the mass of seventy Halcyon-II cruisers.

Each Keyes-class Supercarrier was armed with one advanced MAC cannon equivalent to those aboard the Cole-class Dreadnoughts, but their primary striking power came from the seventy squadrons of Rapier fighters and five squadrons of Broadsword-II heavy fighter-bombers stored inside. Each squadron contained ten fighters or six bombers, which meant that each Keyes-class Supercarrier carried enough firepower to lay waste to virtually any ship that opposed them.

Admiral Hackett was seated in his command chair that overlooked the massive bridge filled with almost two hundred personnel. He said, "We're finally here and the Sangheili were the first to get in on the festivities." All of the bridge crew laughed at this as the Admiral ordered, "Helm, make your course for the enemy fleet and set engines to 100%. When we're at a distance of eight hundred kilometers, stop and hold position."

"Aye sir! Making my heading for 55 degrees left, engines 100%." Said Navigation Officer Norman Pressley.

Admiral Hackett couldn't deny that he was looking forward to tearing the enemy fleet apart.

\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM, IN ORBIT ABOVE PLANET FOUR. ASARI DREADNOUGHT\*\*\_\*\* JUSTICAR'S WRATH\*\*\_\*\*.

Matriarch Adrallia had assumed command when Commander Arterius had to leave the battle due to crippling damage sustained by his ship. It was originally supposed to go to Commander Averis, but word arrived from the Council that Commander Arterius was returning to resume command, and Averis was on the surface anyway. For now Adrallia had to hold off the enemy fleet long enough for reinforcements from Citadel space.

One of the bridge officers shouted in shock, "Matriarch! I have detected an entirely new enemy fleet entering the system."

"Good, make your course for the Mass Relay so we can engage them."

"Matriarch! they are not coming from the Relay. They seem to be using an unusual form of FTL. I have a short video feed of them entering the system for you to see."

The Matriarch's tactical display showed the inky black void of space for a moment, until it suddenly came alive with what looked to be portals appearing all over the place. After a second, a host of ships came out of the portals and held their positions as the portals disappeared as quickly as they came. Most of the ships were of similar size to the ships in the Citadel Fleet but a few were huge, much larger than any of the Citadel ships.

The Matriarch would have to exercise extreme caution from here on out, especially with the fresh memory of the huge enemy ship that had annihilated a good portion of the Fleet a while ago. She also wondered how this species was even able to build such massive ships and use such powerful weapons without even a speck of Element Zero detected anywhere else but her own fleet.

The same Asari officer said once more, "New enemy fleet is on a direct course to us. Their numbers are approximately one hundred thirty."

Adrallia studied the scanner readouts of the new arrivals and a sudden realization came upon her. The ship that had taken on the Fleet a while earlier was of a completely different design than this new enemy fleet. Must be an alliance of races like our own.\_

The Matriarch ordered, "Since the enemy fleet is on a direct course to us, make your heading so that the Fleet faces them. We must try to get the first shot in."

-ooo-ooo-

Admiral Hackett sat up straight in his chair as Second Fleet held position at a distance of eight hundred kilometers away from the enemy fleet. The AI, who was busy hacking into the enemy fleet's data networks, finally said, "I have made entry into their databases and built a somewhat concise lexicon of their languages. Apparently these aliens are a part of a galactic society called the Citadel. Fortunately this society uses a common trade language otherwise it would have been fairly difficult to translate their databases, given the time constraint we have. Once the language barrier was surpassed, it was surprisingly easy to gain entry into their databases and codices to learn about them. One thing I found somewhat odd was that there is no presence of an AI of any form, rather I found simple security programs that I was easily able to bypass or shut down."

Admiral Hackett replied, "Good work Tycho."

The holographic projector warmed and displayed the holographic avatar of the Patton's AI Tycho, who was dressed in typical 16th century attire like the famous astronomer himself. He bowed and replied, "I thank you sir."

The Admiral asked, "Tycho, have you learned enough of their language to send a message to the enemy fleet?"

Tycho's avatar turned red for a moment as he processed his data and then he said, "Yes Admiral. I'll need to leave a backdoor routine so we can maintain an unimpeded communications channel with them."

"Do it."

Tycho's avatar disappeared as he went back into cyberspace to do his work. Fifteen seconds later his avatar reappeared and he said happily, "Backdoor is placed; we have full communications capability with the opposing fleet. Whenever you're ready, simply speak to me and I'll relay the message."

-ooo-ooo-

"Matriarch! We are receiving a message from the enemy fleet! I don't know how they managed to break into our communications suite, but they are broadcasting." Said the Communications Officer.

Matriarch Adrallia was surprised at those words. How could an

unknown alien species gain access to our data and communications channels so quickly? An AI perhaps?\_

"Relay it to my station."

"Yes ma'am."

Matriarch Adrallia's tactical display showed the message that was sent by the enemy fleet. She was shocked that the message was in perfect Asari. It read,

\_To the alien fleet that's opposing us. You have five minutes to pack up and return to whatever hellhole you came from, or we'll turn your fleet into little more than a collection of dust and empty echoes in space. This is Vice Admiral Steven Hackett in command of the Confederation Defense Force Second Fleet, and this is your last warning.\_

The Matriarch was surprised by the aggressive words used in the message, which clearly meant that this "Confederation" was in no mood to take a diplomatic approach to this. She ordered, "It seems like this 'Confederation' is simply a belligerent rabble of alien thugs. Prepare for battle."

"But Matriarch, we were the ones who attacked firstâ€|" said XO Nisara.

"Do as I say or I will remove you from my ship!"

"Yeâ€| yes ma'am."

The Citadel Fleet assembled into a staggered line formation that was ten rows deep.

-ooo-ooo-

The Second Fleet assembled in a box formation in response to the enemy fleet's formation.

Tycho said, "Admiral, you gave them quite the message. I'm surprised that you're not willing to reach a diplomatic solution with them."

Admiral Hackett replied in a terse tone, "I'm a soldier. Leave diplomacy to the politicians."

Everyone on the bridge chuckled at that remark. Admiral Hackett then said, "If they want a battle we should oblige them. I want firing solutions on the enemy fleet."

A moment later a series of lines and arcs were superimposed on the positions of all the ships on the Admiral's display. Admiral Hackett said with a hint of satisfaction, "Very good, send this to the rest of the Fleet."

A bridge officer shouted, "Enemy fleet is firing on us!"

Outside, the enemy fleet fired mass accelerator slugs, torpedoes, and lasers. A salvo of 38kg projectiles from the alien flagship pounded the \_Justinian\_'s shields. Admiral Hackett ordered, "Admiral



Lachance, status report?"

The Admiral Lachance's voice came through in a distinctive French accent, "No damage sustained. Shields have barely been dented by the shots, they went down to 96% for a few seconds then back up to full."

Admiral Hackett smirked and said with a humorous tone, "For all the pretty colors and cool designs for their ships, their firepower is about equal to spitwads against a brick wall." All the bridge officers laughed at this. He double checked the firing solutions on his tactical display and his fleet's formations.

The four capital ships of Second Fleet were near each other except for the Nevsky, which was in the very rear of the formation. Admiral Hackett opened Fleet COM and addressed, "Alright boys and girls. Apparently they aren't taking us seriously and it's now about time to show them the error of their ways. You may fire at will."

With that, all the ships of Second Fleet opened up with a withering barrage of white-hot thunderbolts, thousands of missiles, and pulse laser beams.

-ooo-ooo-

"BY THE GODDESS!" shouted a shocked Matriarch Adrallia as she watched the enemy fleet open up in a hellish barrage. The large ship that was in the center fired two white streaks that shattered one Turian cruiser into millions of pieces and tore the engines off a Salarian frigate. A second later the Salarian frigate exploded and took another frigate with it. Another of the enemy's huge ships fired a wall of missiles that connected with a hapless Asari destroyer which was then pummeled by that merciless barrage. When the debris cleared, the destroyer was in several pieces.

An Asari bridge officer announced, "The kinetic barriers that our ships possess are not capable of deflecting firepower of that magnitude."

Adrallia was aghast at this display of firepower and dismayed at how the enemy fleet was able to destroy her ships with ease. Even the Krogan and Turians don't employ such powerful weapons in their ships.

"Incoming fighters!" shouted a sensor officer. Adrallia watched her display as it showed waves of thousands of singleship fighters coming down upon her fleet like a swarm of hungry army ants on the hunt.

Adrallia ordered, "I want our carriers to launch their interceptors immediately!"

-ooo-ooo-

Lieutenant Jason Kowalski had just taken off from the Nevsky in his Rapier singleship fighter. He had his orders to help take out what looked like the enemy flagship. He said on Squad COM, "Alright guys, you heard the skipper. We gotta keep any of their fighters from getting to our fleet and also deal some damage to the enemy fleet

itself.." All the acknowledgement lights on his display winked green as he put his fighter in a steep dive.

The huge pinkish alien flagship grew large on his display as his squadron neared it. He fired the fighter's ML-30 pulse laser cannons at the enemy flagship and to his surprise, there seemed to be no shielding. He said excitedly, "These suckers have no shields. Let's grease 'em."

He fired one of his 750lb. Lancer missiles at the ship, which detonated in a huge fireball and opened up a huge hole in the side of the ship. He remarked, "Oops, must have hit something vital."

"Let's hit 'em hard and take 'em out." said one of the squadmates.

"Incoming fighters!" shouted another.

Kowalski checked his scanner display and saw that the pilot was indeed correct, there was a group of enemy fighters heading straight for them. He said, "Alright, time to earn our pay."

-ooo-ooo-

Admiral Hackett smiled at the Fleet's handiwork. Almost sixty enemy ships destroyed in only a fifteen minutes with only five losses for Second Fleet. He couldn't think of a more lopsided battle.

A communications officer announced, "Seventh Fleet slipping in right now."

"This is Admiral Harmon of the CDF Seventh Fleet. It seems I missed out on the fun."

Admiral Hackett happily replied, "Good to see you guys. We're just mopping up with this invasion fleet."

"Yes sir, my fleet is yours."

Admiral Hackett turned to his XO and said, "I want our 'package' deployed to Shanxi without delay. It's time to finish this up."

"Yes Admiral."

The package was actually a team of four Spartan IVs. Mike-K077 was the leader of the team, Marcus-K337 was the team's stoic and taciturn marksman, Sean-K092 was the team's demolitions specialist and resident pyromaniac, and finally Alison-K164 who was the team's tech expert. The four Spartans possessed the best combat and training records of the entire K generation of Spartan IVs, which made them ideal for this op on Shanxi.

Over in the \_Gungnir\_'s cavernous hangar bay, the Spartans were preparing for their orbital insertion. Rather than having a nice comfortable ride aboard an Albatross dropship they were going to drop in from orbit via the ORIV^, which replaced the HEV and SOEIV back in 2577 due to its superior performance and safety record.

Mike-051 was the first to speak, "Alright Spartans, you know your

orders. We've got loads of unknown alien hostiles crawling all over New Roanoke. The Sangheili in 31st Fleet do have ground forces planetside as well, and we have to link up with them. We are not to take any prisoners. Any questions?"

Sean-092 raised his hand and asked simply, "Yea boss, when do we get to kill these alien SOBs?" and as he asked that he began to toss a grenade between his hands.

Mike chuckled and answered his quirky teammate, "Very soon Sean. Very soon."

Marcus remarked, "Urban areas are my favorite hunting grounds. Give me some good vantage points and I'll start racking up the kills."

Alison laughed and said, "Hah, not if we can help it. Someone needs to dethrone you from the top rank in killcount score."

All four Spartans laughed for a moment and then got back to their preparations. They opened weapons crates and loaded their pods with their preferred equipment. Alison loaded her pod with her customary tech equipment such as electronic spoofers, hackware chips, high density storage matrix cubes, and a collapsible communications dish.

Marcus loaded his pod with his MSR-17 rail sniper rifle capable of firing a 10mm slug at a speed of 16500 m/s with a nine kilo range, along with eight reloads.

Sean loaded his with C-7 explosive with an array of detonators, an M64 PAVLWS^ laser system, and finally an MA-59 rifle.

Mike's pod had two MA-59 rifles, fifteen reloads for the rifles, as well as sixteen plasma and frag grenades. Of course each Spartan also packed an M6L sidearm and a half dozen grenades.

The Spartans were ready to go. They aligned their ORIV pods in a line and activated the docking clamps. The clamps automatically grabbed the pods and moved them to the launchers at the aft section of the hangar bay. Once the pods were in the ORIV launchers the Spartans got in the pods, strapped in, and waited.

Mike opened Team COM, "You guys set?" All the acknowledgement lights winked green on Mike's HUD. Mike sent the command to launch which put a countdown display on each Spartan's HUD, counting down from ten seconds.

Once the countdown dropped to zero, all four Spartans were glued into their seats as the boosters fitted onto each pod blasted them out of the launch tubes and propelled them towards Shanxi. Upon reaching an altitude of two hundred kilometers, the boosters shut down and jettisoned themselves from the pods, which caused them to de-orbit and begin to drop into the atmosphere. The pod shields came online as re-entry began. Even with the shield deflecting most of the heat, the interior of the pods attained a temperature of more than 50 degrees Centigrade.

A few moments later, the parachutes opened which caused the Spartans to lurch forward in response. Mike checked the LIDAR data on the

pod's tiny display and saw that they would be touching down in a field just outside of town. He also checked for possible enemy AA units and saw no evidence of any units anywhere near the LZ, which came as a surprise to him.

After a minute of slowly descending to the ground, the pods shook which meant that they had touched down. The Spartans activated the explosive bolts keeping the ORIV hatches secured and stepped out.

Mike ordered, "Get your gear squared away, we move out in two."

Acknowledgement lights winked green as each Spartan gathered their gear from the pods and placed it in their armor storage compartments. Mike gathered the extra gear from his pod and stowed it in a pack. Once all the Spartans were finished, they assembled in front of Mike and stood at attention. Mike looked his teammates over and nodded. None of them had any damage to their armor or gear.

The MJOLNIR Mark IX armor was the latest in the series of armor designed for Spartans. The armor was much lighter than its predecessors while sporting shields representing the best in humanity's current progress towards unlocking and refining Forerunner technology. The Mark IX armor was first used for the "I Generation" of Spartan IVs back in 2595.

However, even the Mark IX armor was beginning to become obsolescent as human scientists continued to discover and unlock new secrets in Forerunner technology. Mike's team was slated to field test the cutting-edge Mark X armor at the black ops UNSCINTA^ ARCHON Facility at Eris three months from now, and they could hardly wait.

Alison swiped her gloved fingers over her helmet's polarized faceplate in the iconic "Spartan smile" expression. Mike returned it and pulled up a map of the surrounding area on his HUD. He drew out an AI chip from his pack and inserted it into his helmet's AI interface slot, which caused him to feel a cold liquid presence spill into his mind as the Spartan AI entered within.

The AI quipped, "Ha, still a lot of room in here! Based on neural synaptic firing patterns and current biochemical homeostatic changes, I can tell that my droll observations are getting old, no?"

Mike rolled his eyes and said to the AI, "It's good to see you too Rayne."

Rayne was the latest in a line of special AIs based off of source code and neural pattern maps that Cortana was designed from, by the renowned Dr. Catherine Halsey herself. Rayne's holographic avatar even had a striking resemblance to the famous AI except her "hair" was significantly longer, reaching down past her shoulders.

During her creation, Rayne's virtual synapses were also modeled after templates left in Forerunner logs on the Shield-world Requiem as well as data recovered from the Micro-Dyson Sphere that Dr. Halsey and the Spartan II and III teams were rescued from in 2558. These new manufacturing processes and architectural refinements gave Rayne the equivalent of ten Cortanas in terms of total processing power as well as giving a safeguard against rampancy. In summary, Rayne was the

most powerful AI ever created in human history.

Mike asked Rayne, "Could you plot the most time-efficient path to our current objective?"

Rayne replied, "With pleasure. Workingâ€¦ done! You're welcome."

"Thanks." he responded with a hint of irritation.

The map on Mike's HUD now had a red line going from their position to the Expressway, and then it led into the city center. He also had a NAV marker on his HUD which showed he was 18,349 meters south-south-east of his destination. Mike sent the data to his teammates and said, "Let's hoof it to the Expressway and see if we can get a ride into the city. Also let's do this quietly."

"Yes sir." said the rest of the Spartans.

\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. CITADEL, PRESIDIUM COUNCIL CHAMBERS.\*\*

Commander Arterius had just received the latest report from Matriarch Adrallia, who had assumed command when he left the battle. The report filled him with intense anxiety as he read it, but he temporarily bottled his emotions and continued on his way to the Council. When he arrived at the Council dais he stood at attention as he waited for the Council to address him.

Councilor Sparatus asked, "What's the situation Commander?"

Commander Arterius replied hesitantly at first, "A new enemy fleet entered the battle after my fleet received the beating from the smaller enemy force."

Councilor Tevos motioned for Arterius to transfer the files to their computer terminals. He did so, then stood at attention once he was done.

She said, "So you're saying that a fleet of 130 ships has basically beaten one of our best fleets into submission? Your report shows a fifty percent total loss of the Fleet so far."

"Yes Councilor, that is true."

Councilor Sparatus added, "And yet none of the alien ships use or even contain Element Zero in \_any \_form whatsoever. Is this true?"

"Yes Councilor, that's true as well."

The Councilors looked at each other for a moment and finally said, "We must travel under a banner of peace to the Relay 314 system and try our best to resolve this situation before it spills over into Citadel space and turns into a full-scale war."

Councilor Sparatus added, "If we cannot find a diplomatic solution with this faction then we'll have no choice but to face war unlike any that we've seen before. And I fear it'll be worse than the

Rebellions. Who knows what kind of havoc this faction could unleash upon the galaxy with powerful ships not using even one iota of eezo."

Councilor Valern added with a hint of caution in his voice, "I know that the Quarrians will likely come into their fold since they are completely independent of the Citadel. We cannot take a chance on other species following in their footsteps."

The other Councilors nodded in agreement.

Councilor Tevos finally said, "Another thing is that their indiscriminate use of AI technology is an affront to the principles that guide the Citadel in these troubled times. First we've had the Geth to deal with, now we'll have a new faction with a whole host of AIs at their beck and call. That cannot be tolerated."

Councilor Sparatus yelled, "We also have Averis to worry about. He is a traitorous warmongering psychopath who manipulated \_us \_into declaring unprovoked war against this new faction in the first place! He is the one to blame for this mess! I WANT HIS HEAD ON A PLATTER RIGHT NOW!"

Councilor Tevos interrupted, "Calm yourself Councilor. We are a civilized society, not a pack of raving barbarians."

That elicited a grunt of displeasure from Councilor Sparatus. He eventually said, "No matter. Commander, you are to bring me Averisâ€¦ \_dead or alive\_. You are dismissed."

"Yes Councilor."

With that, the Commander bowed and walked away from the dais. As he did so his Omni-tool received an alert saying that his new ship was prepped and ready to go, so he made his way to the Hierarchy Military Docks.

**\*\*OCTOBER 20, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE. SOUTHERN CHECKPOINT.\*\***

Cpl Rodriguez was lamenting the fact that he was just reassigned to guard this lovely strip of real estate just south of the city, while his friend was busy fighting it out within. A platoon of Marines stopped by a couple of hours prior but they only remained for a few minutes. Other than that he was there with only one other Marine, Lance Corporal Armando Garces. However he had been out on patrol rounds for the past two hours.

What kept him from feeling nervous during the dark night was that the entire surrounding area was bathed in light from a collection of floodlights scattered around the checkpoint.

Rodriguez checked his watch, it showed 2236 hours. It was going to be a long night.

He looked up at the night sky and watched Shanxi's two moons for a while. All of a sudden his attention snapped back to the road when he heard the sound of a distant vehicle. He brought his MA-59 rifle to bear as he waited for the vehicle to come over the hill and into his field of fire.

Garces ran back to the checkpoint and joined Rodriguez. By now the vehicle's headlights were shining on the evergreen trees around the checkpoint. Suddenly a gruff voice came through on the checkpoint's COM gear, "Hey ladies, you can put that hardware away."

Just as the voice finished that remark, the vehicle came over the hill in the form of a Warthog-II LRV and inside the vehicle were five Marines. Rodriguez replied over COM, "Hey screw you guys. We were gonna unload on you."

As they drove by, they gave the middle finger expression which caused Rodriguez to shout, "Yea up yours too guys." He shook his head and returned to his watch.

A half hour later Garces was asleep on his chair and Rodriguez was dozing off. According to stray transmissions through the COM the Marines in the city were finishing up the battle in the city, and that the Second Fleet had just beat the hell out of the enemy fleet.

All of a sudden another noise came from down the road. Rodriguez muttered under his breath, "Not again!" then aimed his rifle down the road. He shook Garces awake and pointed down the road. The droning noise grew louder as the vehicle sped over the crest of the hill and the occupants became visible in the light from the checkpoint floodlights.

"\_Ay Dios mio, mira! Los espartanos.\_" shouted an ecstatic Cpl Garces.

Rodriguez looked and saw that Garces was correct. He could only gasp in wonder, "Spartans!"

-ooo-ooo-

The Spartan team had just commandeered a civilian truck and drove along the Expressway at top speed. Marcus announced, "Checkpoint nine hundred meters ahead. Looks occupied."

Alison chuckled, "How the heck can you see anyone there from \_this \_far away. Even at maximum zoom I can't tell if anyone's at the checkpoint or not." Marcus simply pointed at his faceplate.

Sean laughed and said, "Hey, Alison can't help that she's the new meat in our club. She still hasn't passed initiation."

Mike ignored Sean and said to Alison, "You do realize that every Spartan now receives specific augmentations tailored to their strengths. Marcus has specialized ocular enhancements, you have an array of advanced cybernetic implants installed throughout your brain, and Sean is justâ€¦ Sean."

All four Spartans laughed at that. Mike then looked ahead along the road and saw that Marcus was indeed correct. Rayne announced, "I've already taken the liberty of scanning the vicinity for hostiles with your suit's scanners. None detected. Also I've received word that Second Fleet was victorious in their battle against the enemy fleet and that they're in full retreat."

Sean remarked, "As you all knowâ€¦ no one messes with us

humans."

\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM. CITADEL COUNCIL DREADNOUGHT FLAGSHIP \*\*\_\*\*DESTINY ASCENSION\*\*\_\*\*.\*\*

Councilor Sparatus could hardly believe his eyes. The main displays showed the ruins of the Citadel invasion fleet. The casualty figures were superimposed upon the image: 322 out of 415 ships destroyed and 126,000 units lost in total. What really shocked him were the estimated losses for the enemy: \_twelve \_ships and a preliminary body count of 7,000.

Councilor Tevos looked at the display and saw that the enemy fleet was holding its position in a staggered box formation at a distance of three thousand kilometers. She said with a hint of resignation, "Let's get this done."

Matriarch Lidanya replied, "Yes Councilor. Sending your message to the opposing fleet."

-ooo-ooo-

"Admiral. We're receiving a message from the new ship that just entered the system." Tycho's avatar appeared on the projector just as he said that.

The Admiral replied, "Alright, put it on screen."

"Translatingâ€¦ Done."

\_This is the Citadel Council to the leader of the fleet marshaled to defend this planet.\_

\_This war has been the product of a grave misunderstanding. A renegade officer has deliberately deceived us into giving orders to lead a preemptive strike upon your world and so we seek a diplomatic resolution to this crisis.\_

Admiral Hackett said, "Who the hell do these idiots think they are...? They say they're the leaders of a huge alien empire and yet they let a lowly officer deceive them like that? They're even crawling to us with a pretense of peace in order to save themselves from destruction. Pathetic."

The other Admirals were also present in the \_Patton\_'s bridge. Admiral Horowitz replied, "I can agree with that. It sounds like a convenient excuse for their actions of late."

Admiral Petrovsky added, "I don't know. The pieces fit and they seem sincere in their messageâ€¦"

Admiral Lachance cut him off, "Yes, that's what they want you to think before they stab you in the back! Many times in Earth's history has this scenario been used, and we should know better by now than to trust the enemy."

Admiral Petrovsky snapped, "Could you have said that when we made peace with the Sangheili? When we wrote the founding charter for the Confederation and embraced them as our allies? They were \_genuine\_ in



their intentions to make amends to us ever since the end of that accursed war," he sighed and continued, "I say we give them terms to see how they react. Won't hurt and if they try anything, we can send them to hell."

Admiral Horowitz conceded, "I don't like it, but what the hell."

The three Admirals turned to Admiral Hackett for his input.

He said simply, "Let's send them our terms."

-ooo-ooo-

"We're receiving a response from their fleet! It's in perfect Asari too." shouted one of the communications officers.

Councilor Tevos was very surprised that the aliens had learned one of the main trade languages of the Citadel so quickly, although she also knew they used AIs indiscriminately.

The Councilors began reading the message, which was put on the main tactical display for all to see.

\_This is Vice Admiral Steven Hackett with my fellow Admirals: Rear Admiral Oleg Petrovsky, Rear Admiral James Horowitz, and Rear Admiral Claude Lachance. We represent an alliance of races called the Confederation of United Species. So far you've made contact with two of our member species, humans and Sangheili. We are humans.\_

\_First of all, how dare you assume that we're so easily bought by illusory pleas of peace and that we'd so easily forget the wrongs that you've wrought here. If the story about that so-called renegade officer is true, then it is of no surprise that we were able to beat the HELL out of your mighty fleet. You are a weak and corrupt political entity struggling to maintain a tenuous hegemony over your exploited memberâ€| correctionâ€| SLAVE species. \_

\_Oh yes, we know all about your "Citadel" and the grievous injustices that are committed by your "SPECTRES" against political dissenters and other "undesirables" in your totalitarian regime. We also know all about the Quarians and the highly grievous and shameful persecution they suffer at your hands. You crucified them before the denizens of your regime and now they are treated as dirt. Don't be surprised when they flock to our banner as soon as we contact them.

-

\_And now, I suppose you want to know our terms right?\_

\_They are simple. \_

\_F-k you!\_

Everyone on the bridge, including the Council, was shocked by these words. Clearly a diplomatic approach was going to be extremely difficult with this Confederation, especially since they knew everything about the Council's backroom politics.

After a few minutes of silence, Councilor Tevos said, "Prepare to send our response."

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Tycho announced, "Getting a reply. I'm putting it on screen now."

Admiral Petrovsky walked up to Admiral Hackett and said, "That message was uncalled for Admiral. We're trying to defuse this situation, not inflame it."

Admiral Hackett scolded, "Must I pull rank? I was authorized by the Confederation Senate to give them that kind of message. They have no interest in pursuing any sort of diplomatic relationship with this 'Citadel' until they answer for their crimes and make amends to their oppressed citizens. Leave my bridge immediately otherwise I will bring you up on the charge of insubordination."

Admiral Petrovsky hung his head and left the bridge like a disciplined child.

Admiral Lachance asked, "Admiral, was that really necessary?"

Admiral Hackett replied, "Yes it was. He was out of line when he said that."

Admiral Lachance shook his head in frustration and said nothing more.

They turned their attention to the Council's response up on the main display.

\_Esteemed Admirals, \_

\_Clearly we have gotten off on a bad start. We acknowledge the circumstances behind the Quarian incidents. They were the ones who brought it upon themselves by sanctioning the creation of highly dangerous AIs and then getting themselves mired into a war against said AIs. In order to avoid a crisis in Citadel space, we chose to expel the Quarian embassy and severed diplomatic ties. We do not bar Quarians from traveling in Citadel space however, as it's a crucial part of their Pilgrimage rite. But we also cannot take responsibility for our citizens' own opinions and prejudices toward the Quarians.\_

\_We desperately need to reach a diplomatic solution with your Confederation before this dispute sparks an interstellar war unlike any that either of our civilizations has ever seen.\_

Admiral Hackett became furious at that last sentence.

"Do not send a reply! I want a firing solution on those SOBs right now!"

Tycho's avatar turned red for a moment as he calculated firing solutions for the \_Patton\_.

Admiral Hackett quickly said, "Belay that. I want one more message sent."

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Matriarch Lidanya shouted, "The enemy flagship is preparing to fire on us! We're also getting a response."

The Councilors stared intently at the display.

\_How dare you assume to know what we've gone through in war. For that last remark you should know our answer by now. If you don't want to meet your deaths right now, I'd advise you to leave immediately after you receive this message. \_

\_Here are our terms as set forth by the Confederation of United Species Senate:\_

\_The next time any Citadel Council or other military ship enters Confederation space without our express authorization, that act shall be interpreted as an act of war. \_

\_If you wish to take steps toward the possibility of diplomatic relations, you will repent of your crimes and restore a fair and just government with the species of the Citadel. \_

\_The Confederation of United Species has hereby declared that it doesn't recognize the Citadel Council's authority over the species it claims rule over. This means that any alien species or individuals that seek asylum and/or defection from the Citadel shall be counted among the citizenry of the Confederation forthwith.\_

The Councilors were stunned at this message.

Councilor Sparatus finally said, "Fine, so be it. Let us return to the Citadel with haste."

The \_Destiny Ascension \_came about and returned to the Relay.

\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM, PLANET FOUR. PLANETARY SUBJUGATION FORCE HQ.\*\*

Averis had locked the door to his quarters as he couldn't afford anyone to look in and see what he was doing.

In the middle of the room sat a part of an Element Zero core smuggled in by his subordinates from one of the frigates that was destroyed in the battle above. While it wasn't the full core from the frigate, Averis was confident that its destructive overload would take out a good portion of the city. He smiled deviously as he primed the explosive device next to it.

\_This blast may be insignificant alone, but it'll spark a war unlike any that has occurred for thousands of years.\_ \_And that will be the opportune time for the Great Machines to bring forth the means of transcendence for all.\_

Once the explosives were ready, he also primed the device he had placed under his table. This particular device contained another portion of eezo that would perhaps limit the effects to a confined space. Or perhaps amplify it a hundred-fold. Averis wasn't sure but he didn't care either.

Averis looked in the reflection panel that was installed above his waste receptacle. He was surprised to discover that his left eye now had a subtle red glow to it, and he thought he saw wires behind the pupil. He removed a military eyepiece from his storage locker and put it over his left eye to conceal the peculiar glow.

Averis set the timer on the explosive device for three hours and nonchalantly walked out of his quarters.

**\*\*OCTOBER 21, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE.\*\***

The Spartan team had just entered the city when the vehicle they were driving suddenly broke down. Sean complained, "Oh now that's just bloody lovelyâ€|"

Mike ignored his teammate's complaint and ordered, "We move out on foot from here. We're to follow the NAV marker to its destination."

Sean broke in, "Incoming vehicle from the north!"

All the Spartans took cover behind a solid fence and kept their eyes glued on the northern road.

After a minute of quiet, an odd-looking vehicle became visible on the road. It was grey with red stripes and it had its armor arranged in a series of plates that made it somewhat resemble the feathers on a bird's wings. The strange looking vehicle was armed with a single turret that was almost as long as the tank itself. Sean shouldered his M64 PAVLWS and took aim at the tank.

The alien tank swept its turret left and right in search of the Spartans. Mike whispered, "They know we're around. Go silent. Sean, if you get a shot take it."

Sean's acknowledgement light winked green as the rest of the Spartans crouched behind the fence. All of a sudden the familiar sound of a Phalanx tank began to emanate from the street off to the east, behind the Spartans. A voice with a fairly distinctive Russian accent came through the COM, "Ah, Spartans! I was wondering when you would join in on the festivities. Just leave that tank to me."

Right when the person finished that, a squad of four Phalanx tanks rounded the corner behind the Spartans. The enemy tank sighted them first and fired. There was no whistling noise from their round; just right when the tank fired an explosion blossomed on the lead Phalanx tank.

Mike shouted, "Status report?"

"Ah don't worry yourself, those tanks shoot spitwads. Ready for the fireworks?"

As if to emphasize that remark, the lead Phalanx tank appeared out of the smoke from the explosion and fired its M-139 rail cannon at the alien tank. The round went clean through the tank's main section which caused it to stall and catch fire. One alien soldier crawled out of the disabled tank and opened fire on the Phalanx until a loud gunshot came from Marcus' sniper rifle, which caused the enemy unit to suddenly explode into a collection of body parts and blue-purple

blood.

A few seconds later the tank exploded, showering hot bits of metal everywhere and causing the Spartans' shields to flare.

The tank commander happily stated, "Colonel Zhukov at your service, Spartans. Now if you'll excuse us, we got some work to do west from here." With that, the tanks continued on their way.

Sean grumbled, "Another kill stolen from meâ€¦ you do know that one still counts as mine, Colonel." Of course when he said that, the Colonel was long gone.

Marcus announced, "I have a vantage point. Scanning for enemy troops." Mike looked around and saw that Marcus was nowhere to be found.

Mike sighed and said, "Didn't even realize he was goneâ€¦"

Three more shots rang out from the building above them. Marcus announced, "Bagged three tangos. Picking up ten more coming down the street but the next building over is blocking my aim."

With that, the three Spartans trained their weapons on the street beyond. After a minute of silence, the Spartans began to hear the sound of mechanical voices, as if coming from a fully enclosed helmet. Mike held up his hand which was the signal to hold fire.

As if on cue, the alien soldiers rounded a corner and began making their way toward the Spartans. They seemed completely oblivious to what happened a minute ago until they noticed the burning tank, which caused them to draw their weapons and begin looking around suspiciously. Mike whispered, "Hold your fire unless you're fired upon."

All the Spartans gave their acknowledgement. Two of the alien soldiers began walking cautiously toward the Spartans' cover and then they aimed their guns at the fence. Mike pointed up at Marcus and made a slashing motion across his throat. Marcus' acknowledgement light winked green, and then a second later two shots broke the silence. One shot caught one unit in his arm, which blew it apart and tore off the alien's shoulder as well. The other shot took the head off another, which caused him to drop like a rock. The other alien units noticed the noise of the sniper rifle and began firing at the Spartans.

The Spartans returned fire with their powerful MA-59 rifles and the aliens never stood a chance. Mike said, "Well that was anticlimactic. By the way, nice shooting Marcus," then Mike looked at the pulverized alien units, "Pasted 'em all. Nice work Spartans."

"Thank you sir."

Marcus slowly said, "I uhâ€¦ missed my shot on the second guy. Think I need to practice more." Due to the sheer velocity that the round traveled at, the shockwave alone was still enough to decapitate the alien soldier.

Mike replied, "Oh shut up Marcus. You're by far the best sniper I know."

The Spartans assembled and continued on their way to their objective.

\*\*254:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. RELAY 314 SYSTEM, PLANET 4.\*\*

A sleek grey Turian corvette had just set down behind a building a few minutes away from the Occupation Force HQ. Commander Desolas Arterius stepped out of the ship and checked his pistol, which was fully functional and fully loaded. He was on the planet for one purpose, to arrest or kill Averis.

Commander Arterius left his fighter and ran down the street to try to reach the gate of the HQ, and he suddenly noticed three Turians leaving the complex. One wore black armor and carried a pack slung around his shoulder. It was Averis. The Commander instantly regretted not bringing a sniper rifle and instead began to run towards Averis with his gun drawn.

The two Turian bodyguards were shot just as they were turning around and before anyone could react, Arterius was holding Averis at gunpoint.

The Commander began, "I've been charged by the Council to bring you backâ€¦ dead or alive. What will it be Averis?"

He was silent.

"Answer me!"

Averis slowly turned around and opened his eyes. Arterius recoiled in revulsion when he saw them. Both of Averis' eyes had a noticeable red glow and web-like patterns had started to spread across his face.

Averis began, "Ah, Commander! I was wondering when you would come and watch as I ring in a new era. An era where organics will transcend and become immortal and omniscient."

"You speak madness Averis!"

"You are blind Arterius. You cannot see the beauty that the Machines have shown me. It's like existing within a higher plane. We can become Gods like them!"

Arterius was silent as Averis continued his speech.

"I have left something behind that will spark a brutal war between the two great powers: the Confederation and the Citadel. When they're weak and bloodied from the ceaseless fighting, that is when the Great Machines shall seize the opportunity to make their inexorable conquest throughout the Galaxy! For now though, I must leave you. It's been good seeing you again Commander Desolas Arterius, and I will give your regards to your brotherâ€¦"

All of a sudden Averis' hands glowed red with a mass effect field.

Arterius knew that all biotics could summon a blue field of dark

energy whenever they used their power, but never before has he seen  
\_any\_ biotic form this kind of an auraâ€¦|

Averis pointed his glowing hand toward Arterius' fighter and suddenly pulled back his arm. The Commander looked behind him and saw his fighter flying toward him. He barely managed to dodge and fire a burst from his pistol.

Averis laughed and held his hand in front of him, which made the pistol rounds halt in midair and caused Commander Arterius' pistol to be yanked out of his hand and fall into Averis' hand. The renegade Turian then aimed the gun at Arterius for a moment, but then he suddenly holstered it.

Averis calmly said, "Now is not the time for games, Commander. I bid you good day."

All of a sudden Averis disappeared in a column of red light.

**\*\*OCTOBER 21, 2609. SHANXI, NEW ROANOKE. SANGHEILI OPERATIONS ZONE.\*\***

Both Covun Felsar and Field Master Moram had taken command of the Sangheili deployed on Shanxi. General Williams was about to meet with them to discuss the final strike that would destroy all enemy resistance and end the battle.

Felsar said, "I am pleased with how the battle progresses. It's almost like the enemy isn't even trying."

Moram replied, "Ha, it's almost like they're lining up to fall upon our swords!" All the Sangheili cheered at that statement.

A Sangheili Major ran up to the Sangheili leaders and announced, "Four Spartans are on their way to meet with us right now as well. They're three minutes away."

Field Master Moram said excitedly, "That is like music to my ears. Now we can end this ridiculous battle even quicker."

All of a sudden, an explosion blossomed in the distance.

Felsar said, "That explosion came from the enemy command post!"

Once the explosion reached its full size, another event began to take place. Within seconds the explosion was \_sucked\_ up into a singularity that had just formed in its place. It proceeded to expand and destroy all in its path. Then as if a switch had been thrown, the singularity collapsed and vaporized.

Spreading outwards in all directions was a wave that caused space to ripple around it, and all of the Sangheili took cover as the wave passed through them. Everything went black.

**\*\*OCTOBER 22, 2609. ARCTURUS STATION. CONFEDERATION DEFENSE FORCE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF COUNCIL.\*\***

Arcturus Station was the capital of the Confederation. Situated next to the Arcturus Relay, the station was built in 2581 to serve as the

Confederation's political center.

The station immediately became a hotspot for elite business tycoons, trade magnates, and opportunists; since the Arcturus Relay was connected to many other Relays within Confederation territory.

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Vice Admiral Hackett had just returned from his "negotiations" with the Citadel Council. With him were Captain Schmidt and the other Admirals who were with him during the Battle of Shanxi. There was also Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski, since Schmidt still required medical supervision at her insistence. They were all waiting outside the Joint Chiefs Council thinking about what they were going to say during their hearing.

General Williams suddenly opened the doors and walked out of the Council room looking like a ghost. They wanted blood and weren't going to stop until they got it.

The General stopped and told Admiral Hackett, "They have summoned you. Good luck in there."

All the Admirals got up along with Captain Schmidt. They silently filed into the darkened Council room with stomachs tied in knots. Wierzbowski stopped Schmidt and said, "Try to take it easy, sir. You can't get stressed out as the injuries from your incident still have yet to fully heal."

Schmidt nodded and bade her leave, so she returned to her chair and sat back down. The young doctor thought as she adjusted her skirt,

\_Ok Alex, how are you going to get out of this mess? Oh well, look on the bright sideâ€¦ it might result in a promotion. \_

The Admirals and Captain Schmidt walked toward the center dais, which was surrounded by a table with chairs behind it. The chairs were occupied by the highest ranking officers in the CDF.

A female voice began, "Admirals. You do know why you've been summoned here, right?"

Admiral Hackett replied, "Yes Admiral Drescher. We were summoned here to discuss what actions to take after the incident on Shanxi."

The voice of Grand Admiral Thomas Lasky spoke, "As of 0600 hours local time, the city of New Roanoke has been almost completely destroyed by a black hole produced from an explosion at the enemy occupation force headquarters. The event has resulted in the death of at least 350,000 Confederation citizens."

The Sangheili Supreme Commander Rtas Vadum chimed in, "The Sangheili are mobilized and ready to assist in whatever is decided in this Council."

Admiral Lasky added, "With the Senate's authorization, whatever we decide here will be binding," he leaned forward, "We've received your files and combat logs, Admirals. Your role in the battle shall be



recognized as a great act of valor that is in keeping with everything the Confederation Defense Force stands for. You shall receive commendations for this, Admirals."

The Admirals gratefully replied, "Thank you sir."

Lasky turned his attention to the Captain, "Oh, and Schmidt! In recognition of your valor and sacrifice in line of the most sacred of traditions within the Confederation Defense Force, the Senate has authorized me to grant you a promotion. Congratulations \_Admiral\_." He rose out of his seat and saluted. Everyone else saluted Schmidt as well.

Schmidt was just speechless.

Lasky continued, "In light of these events, I must ask that we declare a state of war against the Citadel. The Senate stands behind this. What say you?"

Everyone in the room simultaneously announced, "Aye!"

-ooo-ooo-

Soon after, the extranet was flooded with the images of the devastated city of New Roanoke with the latest death toll superimposed in red upon each image.

The reaction to them spread like wildfire. Now every citizen of the Confederation of United Species had only three things in mind.

\_AVENGE NEW ROANOKE! \_

\_TO WAR!\_

\_DEATH TO THE CITADEL COUNCIL!\_

\_\*\*So ends an awesome chapter! Will the Spartans, the Sangheili, Commander Arterius, and Colonel Zhukov's tank division survive the devastation of New Roanoke? That remains to be seen.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I know the fight between Averis and Commander Arterius doesn't have the best quality in writing, but meh. Also Reapers have some teleportation technology in my fic. It is limited to a single organic being, so don't worry.\*\*\_

\_\*\*This chapter was supposed to be longer than usual, as its purpose is to help set up the plot for the rest of the story. The enemy tank that the Spartans encounter is my attempt at a Turian tank. I don't know if the Mako or Hammerhead vehicles were ever used by the Citadel species since they were presumably made by humans, and there have been no in-game examples of alien-made tanks.\*\*\_

\_\*\*The next chapter will not be posted for perhaps a week or so, as I want to take a bit of a break. I'll try to get that one up by at least the holidays though, since there's quite a treat in store for you in that chapter!\*\*\_

\_\*\*Definitions:\*\*\_

\_\*\*ORIV: Orbital Insertion Vehicle\*\*\_

\_\*\*PAVLWS Portable Anti-vehicular Laser Weapon System.\*\*\*\_

\_\*\*UNSCINTA: UNSC Intelligence Authority.\*\*\_

## 6. Dark Designs

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\*

\_\*\*Warning: some scenes featuring blood and injury may disturb some sensitive readers.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Even though the Citadel and the Confederation are at war, it will not be a part of the main plot for the story. To all who were concerned about Hackett's OOC behavior in the previous chapter, don't worry he'll adhere to his canon personality once again.\*\*\_

\_\*\*This chapter is mostly about character development for some of my primary OCs, as well as plot development for the fic.\*\*\_

\_\*\*And without further adoâ€¦\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER 5: DARK DESIGNS\*\*

\*\*OCTOBER 24, 2609. ARCTURUS STATION.\*\*

The UNSC Intelligence Authority, or UNSCINTA, was formed in 2567 after ONI was found to be aiding the Servants of Abiding Truth in the Sangheili Civil War. Over eight hundred ONI personnel, including high ranking agents, were arrested in 2566 and tried for high treason. Admiral Margaret Parangosky was arrested as well, but she suddenly died under suspicious circumstances before she could be arraigned in a UEG court. Rear Admiral Jack Harper along with a subsection of ONI is currently at large, as the UNSC and CDF manhunt for them ended on 2600.

ONI was then disbanded in 2567 and the remaining elements not complicit in aiding the Servants were reorganized into UNSCINTA, which was established by the end of that year.

Upon the establishment of UNSCINTA, an array of new facilities was built throughout human controlled space. When the Confederation was founded, UNSCINTA assumed the primary role of intelligence within the CDF both for humanity and the Sangheili, especially the latter as they consider deception and secrecy to be against their warrior code.

-ooo-ooo-

Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski fidgeted nervously in her seat as she waited for the UNSCINTA Assessment Officer to finish processing her files. She drew attention from just about every security guard within view, as she caught one guard momentarily gawking at her slim form in her blue CDF Navy dress uniform.

This wasn't the first time that her attractive appearance drew

attention, as the Marines on Shanxi would often develop a one-sided crush upon her whenever they were in her care.

Ever since she was a young girl, the Lieutenant had dreamt of following in her father's footsteps as an ONI agent. Of course ONI had ceased to exist long before she was born, but fortunately her father was incorporated into UNSCINTA due to his impeccable record. Ever since she joined the CDF at the age of seventeen, her father vehemently ordered her to not even entertain any notion of joining UNSCINTA, citing the fact that she would have to live her entire life in isolation from the normal lives of her peers. Now she was not abiding by her father's instructionsâ€¦

The Assessment Officer entered the other half of the cubicle that Wierzbowski was in, carrying a holotablet with him. He took a steel-eyed glance at her which caused her nervousness to multiply exponentially, and sat down as he scrutinized the data on his tablet in silence.

After what seemed to be like an eternity of silence, the officer began, "Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski, do you swear to acknowledge the following statements to be correct? And are you aware that if you fail to acknowledge this information as being truthful, you may be found guilty of criminal charges in a CDF tribunal?"

She nervously replied, "Yes sir, I do swear."

The officer continued, "Very well. You were born at the colony of Horizon on the date of January 24, 2587, yes?"

"Yes sir."

The officer was quiet for a second, and then asked, "This will be a demographic assessment question. You are mostly of Polish and Swedish descent, yes?"

"Umâ€¦ yes sir."

The officer continued, "You have two elder brothers, born on 2576 and 2584. Is this correct?"

"Yes sir."

"You enlisted in the Confederation Defense Force on April 1, 2604 while underage, even with full knowledge that your status as being underage upon enlistment would have reflected poorly on your record and even brought criminal charges against you for willingly supplying incorrect information?"

A look of fear crossed the Lieutenant's face, "Yeâ€¦ yes sir."

"And yet the evidence for your status as being underage was curiouslyâ€¦ altered?"

"Iâ€¦ I don't know anything about that. It may have been my father."

The officer raised his hand to calm her down, "Don't worry, we here at UNSCINTA greatly respect Overseer Victor Wierzbowski's reputation and service. We won't judge you; in fact we respect your initiative

for enlisting when you did."

The young doctor was relieved to hear that.

The officer continued, "When you joined the CDF you enrolled in the highly specialized and exclusive ADVMEDSPEC accelerated training regimen to ultimately become a doctor, such as you are now, yes?"

"Yes sir, I graduated from the program four months ago as best in class." Wierzbowski replied with a proud tone.

The Recruitment Officer replied flatly, "I see. When you graduated from ADVMEDSPEC, you were assigned to Shanxi to work double duty as both a civilian and military doctor, correct?"

"Yes sir. The workload of being a military doctor on Shanxi was fairly light, as it was a peaceful colony. However being a civilian doctor was an exact opposite, with a very heavy workload... being that it's primarily an agricultural colony."

The Recruitment Officer folded his hands and straightened in his seat as he continued, "I assume that you've cleared this with CDF brass?"

"Yes sir, of course."

"I see, moving on. For what purpose do you wish to become an agent for the UNSCINTA? Even with your apparent lack of specialized covert combat training that is a prerequisite of any prospective applicant for the UNSCINTA?"

Lieutenant Wierzbowski straightened in her chair and locked her strikingly blue eyes with the officer's own eyes, which caused him to sink back into his chair slightly. She stated, "I wish to follow in my father's path and fulfill a dream I've always had since I was very young. I love being a doctor but I don't think I can stay back and just patch up Marines; I want to do something about it. Ever since the tragedy on Shanxi, I've wanted to get into the action. I realize that I'm not frontline combat material or anything like that, but I want to do this."

The officer was silent as he entered the data in his holotab. He abruptly said, "There is one more thing to complete, then you may leave."

Wierzbowski was about to ask what it was, until a biometric sampling pad slid out from the low wall in front of her. The officer calmly said, "Please place your hand on the pad. A comprehensive tissue test is required to confirm your identity."

She placed her left hand on the pad and felt a sharp pain as the pad began to draw blood as well as a microscopic biopsy from inside her hand. She continued to wince in pain but the officer ordered, "Hold your hand on the pad for three more seconds."

Once the three seconds had passed, the red light on the pad switched off and the sharp pain in her hand quickly abated as the pad applied an analgesic to the small wound. She also saw what looked like two vials full of her blood pop up on the other side of the thick window.

The officer assured her as he took them, "The microscopic solid tissue sample in one of the vials is necessary to reinforce the authenticity of the identification test from your blood."

Wierzbowski's vision began to tunnel and she felt dizzy. The officer noticed this and added, "Syncope^ episodes are common after this procedure due to its nature. Also be aware that the analgesic can behave like a mild anticoagulant, so the wound will continue to bleed for some time."

Once the dizziness cleared, she nodded, "I understand sir," and she watched the biometric pad as it slid back into its enclosure, "I'm sure you keep that pad sanitizedâ€|"

The officer replied, "The biometric pad is stored in an autoclave^ when not in use and the needles are incinerated. I'll give you a bandage right now." The officer produced a bandage from the kit behind him and gave it to her through the narrow slot in the glass panel. It had the characteristic odor of antiseptic chemicals.

She gingerly wrapped the bandage around her hand and asked, "Am I free to go?"

"Yes you are. We will be in touch."

Wierzbowski got up and walked out of the cubicle, and she was searched upon exiting the complex. She thought to herself as she made her way to the CDF complex,

\_I just hope I can make my dad proud. And I hope he will forgive me.\_

While on her way to the CDF complex, Lt. Wierzbowski spotted a familiar figure amidst the crowd of people walking this way and that. She recognized him after a moment, "Admiral!"

Admiral Schmidt was making his way to the CDF complex to consult with the Admiralty about the war's latest developments. He suddenly heard a female's voice shout, "Admiral!" He whipped his head around and saw a fairly tall young woman with a slender build and platinum blonde hair dash up to him in her blue CDF dress uniform. She snapped a crisp salute at Schmidt.

He recognized her and returned her salute, "At ease Lieutenant. It's good to see you again, are you here for a follow-up?"

"No sir. Although I have been wondering about how you've been doing with your recovery?"

Schmidt replied, "I've been doing well. Another doctor has examined me and determined that I'm well on my way to a full recovery. I've been cleared for duty as well."

Wierzbowski's face took on a look of relief when she heard that, "I'm glad sir."

Schmidt added, "I've been told that the \_Corinth\_'s repairs will be complete sometime next week. They've been working nonstop on it with a full complement of technicians."

"I'm glad to hear that too, sir."

Schmidt asked with a hint of concern when he saw her bandaged hand, "What happened?"

"It's nothing, I'm justâ€¦ clumsy." Wierzbowski lied.

She held out her left hand for Schmidt to look at the bandage. It was wrapped in two layers around her hand, but an inch wide bloodstain was still visible through the bandage. This caused a nervous smile to cross her face as she didn't want the Admiral, whom she respected like her father, to know the truth yet.

Schmidt released her hand and said, "Since you're on your way to the CDF complex, would you like to accompany me?"

As she applied pressure to her hand she said, "That would be nice, sir. Thanks."

The two continued on their way to the CDF facility. As they walked they passed by an NCO club, which made a couple of the Marines inside whistle at Wierzbowski and one even struck a suggestive pose. She slightly blushed as Schmidt yelled, "You jarheads had better stand at attention and salute the \_Lieutenant \_immediately!"

An expression of horror painted each Marine's face as they stood straight and quickly saluted in response. Schmidt walked up to the one that made the suggestive pose and threatened, "If I catch you doing that type of behavior again, you'll have hell to pay. Are we clear on that \_Sergeant\_?"

The terrified Marine replied, "Crâ€¦ crystalâ€¦ sir!"

Schmidt stared at the man for another moment and finally said, "Carry on Marines."

After they had passed the NCO club, Schmidt said, "I'd imagine you get that kind ofâ€¦ attention a lot?"

Wierzbowski replied, "Yes sir. During my time on Shanxi, a lot of the Marines I'd attend to would develop some form of attraction for me. It was uncomfortable at first, but I've grown used to it."

Schmidt chuckled, "You know, you remind me of my daughter."

She replied curiously, "How so, sir?"

Schmidt thought for a moment as he hadn't seen his daughter for several years now, "Well, she is like you in a lot of ways. She's about your age and she looks quite like you, except for the hair. She doesn't have the striking blonde hair you have. Hell, if you dye your hair brown and stand next to each other I wouldn't really be able to tell you apart."

As they carried on their conversation, they quickly arrived at the CDF complex and walked to the Admiralty Board chambers. Schmidt said, "This is my stop. I've enjoyed this conversation, Lieutenantâ€¦ uhâ€¦ forgive me, I still can't really pronounce your last name."

Wierzbowski laughed and walked him through it, and then when they were finished she saluted as Schmidt left. She continued on to her temporary quarters as she was feeling quite tired from the events of the day.

Once Wierzbowski arrived at her sparse quarters, she checked her hand and saw that the bloodstain had grown somewhat and there was even a small stream of blood trickling down her fingers. She applied pressure once more and a fleeting sensation of lightheadedness washed over her.

When she was finished with tending to the wound on her hand, she walked toward the bunk and plopped herself down upon it. As soon as she did so, she fell into a deep sleep.

**\*\*OCTOBER 24, 2609. SHANXI, RUINS OF NEW ROANOKE.\*\***

New Roanoke was a prime example of a wasteland. The damage caused by the black hole from the enemy's headquarters was staggering. Nearly every building was leveled and there was a huge hemispherical crater that extended for over a mile all around, and it was centered at where the enemy command post was.

Vice Admiral Hackett looked upon the devastation and commented, "So this is the Citadel's handiworkâ€|"

Grand Admiral Lasky turned around and replied, "Yes, it is. This is just like Pearl Harbor and Harvest all those years ago."

Admiral Hackett rubbed his chin with his hand for a moment and said, "It is surrealâ€| isn't it sir?"

Admiral Lasky answered, "I can see it for myself and yet my mind still has to accept it for what it is, you know?"

"Yes sir."

Admiral Hackett then asked, "Could anyone survive such an event?"

Admiral Lasky furrowed his brow and answered, "It's possible. The outermost reaches of the city did not sustain nearly as much damage compared to further inside. The Sangheili ground force command post was supposed to be there."

"Let's hope so, sir."

Admiral Lasky turned to Hackett with a serious expression on his face and said, "Hackett, I've received the communications logs from your dialogue session with the Citadel Council. I must say that your choice ofâ€| words was quite inappropriate for the situation and your 'conversation' with Admiral Petrovsky was out of line."

As he said that, the expression on his face relaxed, "I also feel that you have abided by all the rules set forth by the Confederation as to the conduct of war. Because of that, you will not face any charges as to your conduct during negotiations."

Admiral Hackett replied with a remorseful tone, "I must apologize for

my actions. At the time I was deeply angered by the Citadel's unprovoked aggression against us and for their role in disrupting the way of life for millions of Confederation citizens. But I lost my temper and have shown myself as a bad example to my men, and I deeply regret it, sir."

Admiral Lasky held Hackett's attention for a moment then said, "Very well. You're a good man and a natural leader, Admiral. It'll be up to you to lead the Navy in these troubled times. This is why the Senate and I have agreed to award you the rank of Fleet Admiral."

Admiral Hackett's face took on an expression of amazement, "Me sir? I don't know what to say!"

Admiral Lasky produced a wooden box from his pocket and he opened it. Within lay the rank insignia of a Fleet Admiral. Admiral Hackett took the insignia and medal out and pinned them to his uniform. Once he was done, Lasky saluted him.

Once he was done, Admiral Lasky looked up into the morning sky and remarked, "You know, this kind of devastation brings back memories of all those planets and innocent people that were mercilessly glassed by the Covenant."

\_Billions lost in that accursed war. Too many heroes have fallen. I fear this new war will have the same effect.\_

Admiral Hackett replied, "I was born four years before the end of the War, so I personally don't know what it was like firsthand. I just know what my father told me as a veteran."

Admiral Lasky's face now looked like that of an ancient, wizened hermit. He said softly, "I'm becoming an old man, Admiral. I've seen enough of the Great War to last many lifetimes, and you should count yourself lucky that you have not."

Admiral Hackett was silent.

\_Too many lost souls. The plight of humanity is like an endless litany of bloodshed and tragedy.\_

**\*\*256:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. UNCHARTED SYSTEM.\*\***

A lone squid-shaped ship drifted along the void of space. The ship seemed to take on a life of its own, even though it had organics within.

An Asari matriarch clad in an elegant scaled black dress walked up behind a Turian with obvious mechanical prostheses attached to his body. He was seated and deep in thought as the slightly nervous matriarch began, "We've detected up an incoming ship. Averis is on board as you've requested."

The Turian remained silent as the matriarch continued, "The war is progressing according to your plan. The Confederation and the Citadel have fought two skirmishes so far, but I feel this war will escalate in the near future."

Finally the Turian spoke up, "You have served me well so far Benezia. All things are progressing as I've seen!"



Benezia was silent.

The Turian continued, "Now leave me and prepare to receive our esteemed visitor."

Benezia replied simply, "Yes Saren."

Saren moved his hand away from his face and stared straight ahead just as Benezia bowed her head and walked out of Saren's chambers.

Once she had left Saren's sanctum, Matriarch Benezia's enthralled mind had just experienced a fleeting respite from the endless yet strangely alluring cacophony of voices that seemed to emanate from every square foot of the ship. Even with the strongest mental defenses she could summon to protect her own sanity, she was still hopelessly bound to Saren's iron will and had no choice but to follow his every command unquestioningly.

After a moment of experiencing this sensation of freedom, Saren's voice spoke in her mind, and it seemed to have some type of mechanical-sounding echo as well.

\_Benezia. Even with the incredible mental fortitude that you have marshaled to preserve your sanity and identity, do not forget that you are still under my control. I see what you see, hear what you hear, and feel what you feel. I am within you always. Do not forget thatâ€|\_

\*\*OCTOBER 24, 2609. ARCTURUS STATION.\*\*

Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski was awakened by the sound of her small holotablet beeping at her. She checked the time and saw that it was 10:41, which meant she had slept for more than twelve hours.

She checked her hand and to her surprise all there was left of the wound yesterday was just a small red mark on the palm of her hand. She wondered how it had healed so quickly as she checked the messages on the holotablet. There was one message from an unknown source which intrigued her, so she opened it.

\_Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski,\_

\_Your request to be inducted into UNSCINTA has been approved. You are to report to the UNSCINTA complex to be processed and transported to a secure training facility by 1400 hours today. Tardiness will not be tolerated.\_

\_-UNSCINTA Arcturus Overseer Huang.\_

Wierzbowski was excited to know that she was accepted, but noticed that time was quickly running out. She showered, put on a fresh uniform, and left her quarters as quickly as she could.

Once she arrived at the UNSCINTA complex, she was subjected to the usual test, which consisted of a biometric scanner taking a reading of her retina and iris. Once she passed the identification, the titanium doors opened to reveal the cavernous UNSCINTA complex.

The Lieutenant saw a large group of recruits assembled in a line going toward the other side of the facility. She looked at everyone and noticed that she was the only one with vivid blonde hair, so she would stick out for sure. She forced her nervous stomach to quiet down as she took her place in line.

Twenty minutes later, she finally moved up to the Medical Examination room. The solid titanium door slid open to reveal a stark white room with nothing in it save a small table in the corner with a stack of thin paper gowns on it. She tentatively walked in.

Someone spoke through the speaker in the ceiling, "Lieutenant Wierzbowski, please remove everything you have on and put on this gown. When you're done, stand in the center of the room and remain absolutely still." She quickly changed out of her uniform and carefully put on the thin paper gown, then walked toward the red square in the center of the room.

After a moment, a laser grid began to emanate from the floor and work its way up her body. She stared straight ahead as the imager took a surface scan of her. Once it was finished, the grid disappeared and was replaced by a loud humming sound as two white pillars rose out of the floor on either side of her.

The same voice spoke once more, "Remain absolutely still Lieutenant. Even the slightest movement will create artifacts in the image and may result in immediate disqualification." She gulped.

Each pillar split into two halves that took their place in front and behind her, along with two on her sides. A subtle humming noise filled the room as the imaging devices and scintillation receptors inside the pillars began to take a deep scan of her body. After a full minute, the pillars reassembled themselves and slid back down into the floor.

A hidden door in the wall behind her slid open and a technician walked toward her with a needle in hand. He took a blood sample from her arm and left without uttering a word.

After a minute of silence, another voice spoke, "You may leave Lieutenant."

She walked over to the table, changed back into her uniform, and then left the room. An agent greeted her and motioned for her to follow him until they came to the heavily restricted UNSCINTA docks, and the only ship that was there was the jet-black UNSCINTA stealth frigate Nightwind. A line of inductees extended from her all the way to the ship's main access airlock.

After some time, she finally boarded the ship and made her way to an unoccupied seat in the crew area. One of the Marine recruits turned around in his seat and upon noticing the Lieutenant, he quickly stood up and saluted. Wierzbowski returned his salute and the Marine introduced, "I'm Staff Sergeant Carlos Ramirez, ma'am."

Wierzbowski replied, "It's nice to meet you Ramirez, I'm Lieutenant Junior Grade Alexandra Wierzbowski," one of Ramirez's eyebrows shot up at the mention of that name as she continued, "I know, I get that all the time with my last name."

Ramirez laughed, "I'm sorry, it's just that I've never heard that name before."

Wierzbowski was about to respond when the ship's intercom speakers boomed, "Welcome to the Nightwind. We're now underway, and don't get too comfortable as the ETA to our destination is an hour through Slipspace."

Wierzbowski gave one last look at Ramirez and sank down into her seat.

**\*\*OCTOBER 24, 2609. UNSCINTA TRAINING FACILITY CODENAME "DELPHI", REACH, EPSILON ERIDANI SYSTEM.\*\***

During the Fall of Reach back in September 2552, the planet was almost completely vitrified^ by the Covenant. After the Great War ended the next year, the planet stood untouched as UEG politicians were locked in a fierce debate over whether to restore the planet's ecosystem or to leave it be and consider it a memorial to the fallen.

On the year 2554 it was decided that Reach had to be restored to its former status as one of humanity's major military fortresses. The terraforming project proceeded with as much that could be spared, but the sheer amount of damage to the planet turned the project into a high-impossible challenge for which the stakes were high; if the project worked, Reach would be restored and it would provide excellent data for use in restoring the other UNSC planets that were glassed by the Covenant.

After 35 years of hard work, Reach was finally restored to its prior state. Almost immediately the UNSC portion of the CDF reestablished and rebuilt all of the facilities that were destroyed and the cities were also rebuilt within three years. Of all the cities rebuilt, only the site that was New Alexandria remained in its pristine state, since it was to be a memorial to all the brave souls who died defending Reach against insurmountable odds.

Even though the restoration project was a great success, the global climate was a long-term casualty of the glassing. Erratic weather patterns and powerful storms swept across Reach on a daily basis, and the average temperature was significantly lower than it was before Reach was glassed.

-ooo-ooo-

The displays in the crew area of the Nightwind showed the forested, snow-capped mountains and frozen lakes of the subalpine UNSCINTA DELPHI Zone. A weather warning message was flashing on the lower right corner of the displays, which indicated that a blizzard was incoming within three hours.

The Nightwind proceeded to swing around and hover above what seemed to be a small snowy meadow, until it appeared to split into two halves. The Nightwind then descended into the darkness below.

Lieutenant Wierzbowski watched as the camera displays turned from white to black as the ship descended underground. She patiently waited for the Nightwind to finish its descent.

The Nightwind continued to descend until it came to a cavernous docking chamber. The huge cave was large enough to fit five frigates in a stack, which was quite impressive. Once the ship docked, the UNSCINTA handlers came into the crew area and ushered the recruits out. Everyone assembled outside in a perfect line and stood at attention.

Out of the titanium blast doors came three figures, one of whom was an impeccably groomed man who wore a jet-black UNSCINTA uniform adorned with the insignia of an Overseer; and he also had short brown hair with streaks of grey. The man walked toward the inductees with long sweeping strides and within seconds he was right in front of them.

It took a few moments for Wierzbowski to recognize the man, as the uniform had thrown her off. But the man's face was unmistakable.

It was her father.

**\*\*257:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. C-SEC, CITADEL.\*\***

Garrus Vakarian smiled at the data that was displayed on his workstation computer. This would serve as further ammunition for his future plans.

He had just uncovered evidence in an investigation that linked a high ranking politician to a smuggling racket that was rampant in the lower reaches of the Zakera Ward. He knew that the bureaucracy would simply make this evidence disappear, but at least it would serve as a catalyst for what he planned to do.

Garrus had grown disillusioned with his life in C-Sec working for what he viewed to be the most corrupt organization in the galaxy. He wanted to get away from the Citadel and fight against the corruption that spewed forth from the Presidium rather than spending his career pushing papers and arresting petty criminals. To that effect, Garrus had a civilian leisure ship that he had "procured" from a C-Sec impound dock a while ago, along with a recorded broadcast that would indicate his willingness to surrender and seek asylum.

He was planning on defecting to the Confederation.

When Garrus was done downloading the files of his investigation to his Omni-tool, he gathered his belongings and a pistol, and then made his way to the C-Sec dock. A C-Sec dock patrol officer handed him the ID card that would grant him access to the dock where his ship was. As he passed the dock officer, both remained silent. He located his ship, got in, and promptly left the docks as quickly as he could.

Now that Garrus was free of the Citadel, he plotted his course for the Mass Relay and to freedom. While he was on his way however, the small display in front of him showed an incoming message from C-Sec,

Attention unknown vessel, \_

You are to cease and desist immediately. If you do not, you will be fired upon.\_

Garrus ignored it as his ship neared the Mass Relay. He set the destination for an unknown but active Relay outside of Citadel space. He was risking all on the chance that his intention to defect would be considered genuine by the Confederation.

Just as another C-Sec warning was coming in, the Relay sent his ship on the instantaneous journey to the unknown Relay beyond.

Once he arrived, the new system he found himself in had no habitable planets according to his ship's scanners.

\_Perhaps a dead endâ€|\_

Garrus was about to return to the Relay and try another system when four portals opened in space with four ships coming out of them. Garrus knew it was the Confederation welcoming party, so he broadcasted his surrender on all known frequencies.

\_This is Garrus Vakarian, formerly an officer of Citadel Security. I wish to announce my surrender and intention to defect to the Confederation of United Species.\_

A reply came through in perfect Turian,

\_If your intentions are true, you will report to Arcturus Station without delay for processing. You will have an escort at all times. If you try anything you will be immediately targeted and destroyed. Do you understand?\_

Garrus was surprised at how quickly the Confederation had picked up on and mastered the main trade languages of the Citadel within only a couple of days. He also wondered where this "Arcturus Station" was. He quickly gave his reply to the CDF ships surrounding his own.

The ships began to move off, which prompted him to follow.

After some time, a space station became visible in the distance. Garrus followed the ships toward it and he could only marvel at the majesty of the station, which was nearly the size of the Citadel itself. Unlike the Citadel, which had been not been built but merely found by the current speciesâ€| he could tell that this magnificent station was built by the Confederation itself.

Garrus followed the CDF ships to one of the many docks on Arcturus Station. He received another message,

\_You will dock here and surrender yourself to CDF ArcSec personnel immediately.\_

Garrus maneuvered his ship into position for the docking clamp to grab his ship and move it to the airlock. Once that was done, the airlock alarm chimed and it opened to reveal a full contingent of heavily armed security officers.

Garrus had never seen a human before in person, but based on the data that C-Sec and the STG had been able to glean from the Confederation extranet, he knew that the security officers were humans. They surrounded Garrus and held him at gunpoint. Garrus dropped his pistol and put his hands behind his head, then the officers cuffed him and

led him out of the ship.

He half expected to be paraded through the main sections of the station, but the ArcSec officers whisked him away through a side passage. After what seemed to be an hour of walking through a series of mazes, he came up to a huge door that was marked ArcSec Interrogation and Processing Complex. The huge door slid open to reveal a room devoid of any furnishings except a small table and two chairs. The officers left the room and Garrus was now alone in the cold room.

Another human opened a hidden door on the opposite side of where Garrus had come in. The man wore a distinctively different uniform than the officers that arrested Garrus; his uniform was jet-black. The man put a small chip on the table and then he pointed at the chip and to his left arm, which indicated to Garrus that the chip was for his Omni-tool. He gingerly picked up the tiny chip and inserted it into his Omni-tool.

The man began, "Do you understand what I am saying?" He spoke perfect Turian.

Garrus replied hesitantly, "Yesâ€¦ I do understand you. It surprises me to no end that the Confederation has mastered the Turian languages in so little time."

The man replied with a hint of pride, "Our AIs are the best in the galaxy. We've mastered your trade languages within one hour after first contact. We also know about the STG agents that had infiltrated Confederation space, however they don't really pose much of a threat as our own UNSCINTA now monitors their every move. We deliberately leaked the information that the Citadel now knows as well."

Garrus was surprised at how the Confederation was so far ahead of the Citadel and its closed-minded and corrupt Council. He now hoped that the Confederation would eventually attempt to take the Citadel itself and "clean up" the Presidium bureaucracy..

The man continued, "Now, uhâ€¦ your name?"

Garrus quickly replied, "Oh, sorry. My name is Garrus Vakarian, formerly of Citadel Security."

The man leaned back in his chair and laughed, "Ha, a cop! I like you already." he leaned back forward and his face took on a serious expression, "Now Garrus, I must know whether your intentions are genuine. While we're not experts in Turian physiology and psychology, we're confident that our present knowledge is enough. We need you to submit to a special test that would tell us for sure whether your intention to defect is genuine."

The man snapped his fingers and the hidden door promptly opened to reveal an ArcSec officer bringing in a box-like device. He set it down on the table and left as quickly as he came.

Garrus watched as the box opened to reveal a strange looking device that possessed more wires than he could count. He knew this would be some type of polygraph test, so he sat still as the man attached the leads to his head. Once he was done, he began, "Your name is Garrus Vakarian, right?"

"Yes."

"You were formerly an officer of Citadel Security, yes?"

"Yes I was."

"Do you intend on defecting to the Confederation of United Species?"

Garrus stared at the interrogator and said simply, "Yes."

The interrogator asked with feigned curiosity, "Why?"

"I grew tired of the corruption that pervades the Citadel every day. I also want to see the Council humbled by the might of the Confederation, so that a fair government could be established in their place."

The polygraph readout showed no sign of deceit, which elicited a pleased expression from the interrogator. But the test was far from over and Garrus knew this would be a long sessionâ€|

**\*\*OCTOBER 24, 2609. UNSCINTA DELPHI TRAINING FACILITY. REACH, EPSILON ERIDANI SYSTEM\*\***

Lieutenant Wierzbowski's father stood and addressed the recruits with his powerful voice,

"Welcome, all of you, to the UNSCINTA DELPHI training facility. You have applied and have been accepted to undergo training and testing for the chance to potentially join the ranks of the UNSCINTA itself. You will undergo one month of subliminal training for twenty hours per day, then four hours of physical conditioning and/or rest. Once the subliminal training is complete, you will undergo four weeks of intense physical exercise and physical application of all the training you have obtained from your subliminal training. Any questions?"

A Navy inductee asked, "What do you meanâ€| subliminal?"

Overseer Wierzbowski replied flatly, "You will be kept in a chemically induced altered state of consciousness for a month, with four hour daily breaks to prevent complications from being in that state for extended periods of time. The drug cocktails we use have been proven to keep you in that altered state for as long as needed while still allowing us to easily rouse you from that state within seconds. And finally, I must add that there are no ill effects aside from disorientation."

Another recruit asked, "Yes sir, but how do you give us the information while we're asleep? Dreams?"

The Overseer continued, "We will employ an experimental neural link with your standard issue neural implants that will 'download' this data directly into your brain via a process called memory transference. Once this information has been introduced and formed into conscious memories, we reinforce them repeatedly, hence the month-long training phase. To sum it all up, this information will become a part of you."

A Marine recruit complained, "So let me get this straightâ€¦ you spooks are going to screw with our heads and turn us into zombies?"

Overseer Wierzbowski shook his head and replied with a hint of frustration, "No, you maintain the right to opt out of this training regimen at \_any time.\_ During your daily break, you may simply come to me or my associates and express your wish to be withdrawn from the program. There will be no repercussions and you will be returned to your previous location as quickly as possible. Keep in mind that once you leave, you will never be allowed to rejoin the UNSCINTA. So if you desire to leave, make sure that desire is absolute. Are there any more questions?"

Lieutenant Wierzbowski steeled herself and spoke up, "And what about your daughter?"

The Overseer's eyes instantly fell upon his daughter and his face went pale. All of the recruits turned their heads to look at Lieutenant Wierzbowski. The Overseer walked toward the Lieutenant and stopped right in front of her. He said softly, "I knew that you had joined UNSCINTA. I must say that I am quite disappointed in you Alex."

The Lieutenant replied with emotion evident in her voice, "I'm sorry Father, but I want to do thisâ€¦ I want to follow in your footsteps to become part of something bigger."

The Overseer's face remained stoic but his eyes betrayed the storm of emotions going on within. After some time, he finally yielded, "I also respect what you've done and I can't stop you. But I must tell you, for your sake and the sake of those around you, that you will receive no preferential treatment. You will be trained the same as the other recruits. Do you understand Alex?"

She replied simply, "Yes sir."

The Overseer signaled for the inductees to follow him into a darkened section of the main facility and split into three groups of sixteen. Each group went into separate partitions of the dark room.

The darkened room was full of pods wired with all types of medical monitoring equipment. There were also form-fitting grey bodysuits sitting on tables next to each pod. Once Wierzbowski came up to her pod the Overseer addressed the recruits through an intercom, "The preliminary evaluation phase will begin immediately. You will undergo the same altered state of consciousness as the main phase, except you will receive no subliminal input. If we determine that you are incompatible, you will be disqualified and returned to Arcturus Station. You will put on the suits next to your pods and begin the preliminary test without delay."

Grey partition walls rose out of the floor to separate each recruit from each other as they began to change into the bodysuits. Once they were finished, very soft musical beats began to emanate from speakers within the partition walls. The Overseer explained, "Certain binaural rhythmic tones are used to prepare the brain by promoting the formation of delta and theta waves for the deep sedation that is required. This greatly reduces the likelihood of side effects



appearing once you emerge."

Each recruit, including Wierzbowski, got into the pods and lay still. IV lines automatically connected to each of their arms and began to inject the chemicals.

Wierzbowski kept her eyes open as she waited for the drugs to take effect. After a few seconds, her vision began to shimmer and darken and the noise of the medical equipment seemed like it was getting further and further away. This continued for a further fifteen seconds until she fell asleep.

**\*\*259:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. UNKNOWN SYSTEM.\*\***

Saren and Averis were both aboard the former's flagship Sovereign. Within his own sanctum, Saren was discussing with Averis about what the next step meant, since they had received cryptic instructions from the Reapers an hour ago.

Saren said, "The Reapers have instructed us to go to Planet 364577-4 to retrieve an artifact left by those who came before"

Averis replied curiously, "By those who came before? Another Prothean artifact?"

Saren clarified, "No" by those who came before the Protheans. I know not of any details of such a race, but based on imagery shown to me by the Machines they were a powerful civilization that could be perceived as godlike when compared to the Protheans."

Averis' interest was now piqued, "What is this artifact called?"

Saren closed his eyes to search his memories. After a moment he began to explain,

"The artifact is called the Conductor. The Reapers have explained to me that it is a sister artifact to one called the Composer. According to their description, the Composer has the power to impose synthesis upon any organic being, thus giving them the means of transcendence. Unfortunately the Composer was destroyed some time ago."

"And this Conductor?"

Saren continued, "The Conductor is an artifact designed to amplify the effect of the Composer over a much larger scale as well as giving its user absolute control over the subjects. Without the Composer it is useless. I personally do not know why the Reapers desire to possess the Conductor so much. Unless"

"They are going to assemble a new Composer"

**\_\*\*The plot is still thickening! \*\*\_**

**\_\*\*The next two chapters will be posted soon, if I can help it.\*\*\_**

**\_1/3 Edit: The next chapter is just about finished, so have patience :)\_**

\_\*\*Definitions:\*\*\_

\_\*\*Autoclave: A device that uses pressurized steam to sterilize medical instruments or whatever else that is placed inside of one.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Syncope: Fainting sensation or episode. \*\*\_

\_\*\*Vitrify: The process of turning something into glass; in this case using extreme heat such as a Covenant plasma bombardment.\*\*\_

## 7. Enter A Legend

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\*

\_\*\*The timeline of this fic will advance by almost two months during this chapter.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I apologize for not updating for a while, as I've been rather busy and this chapter has taken a lot of work to plan out and type up. I even hit a bout of writers' block while working on it, but fortunately it resolved itself rather quickly. \*\*\_

\_\*\*And now on with the chapterâ€|\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER 6: ENTER A LEGEND.\*\*

\*\*OCTOBER 25, 2609. UNSCINTA DELPHI TRAINING FACILITY. REACH, EPSILON ERIDANI SYSTEM.\*\*

Lieutenant Alexandra Wierzbowski saw light once again after what seemed to be an eternity in the dark. Immediately she remembered that she had been sedated as part of the preliminary test for the UNSCINTA subliminal training regimen.

She blinked and her vision began to resolve shapes and details from her pod, and then she began to hear the noise of the medical equipment around her. She willed her toes and fingers to move, and they did after some effort. The IV lines connected to her arms withdrew from the veins they were in and retracted into a small autoclave underneath the pod.

After a few moments, the pod opened and the Lieutenant groggily climbed out of it. She almost fell forward when she stood but she grabbed hold of the pod to steady herself. She felt dizzy and disoriented when she stood straight, but the dizziness quickly passed.

The Overseer spoke through the intercom, "The evaluation phase is now complete. It grieves me to tell you that some of you will not be suitable for trainingâ€| I will read off the names of those who are incompatible."

Lt. Wierzbowski started to get nervous as the Overseer began announcing the names. Fortunately hers was not among them. She knew that she was in for a long haul with training.

\*\*260:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. PLANET 364577-4.\*\*

Planet 364577-4 was a jungle world that orbited an active GV2-class star. The planet itself possessed a huge ocean that occupied 80% of the total area in the northern hemisphere, and the southern hemisphere was mostly one supercontinent that was marked with three massive volcanoes.

Saren was certain that this was the world where the Conductor was hidden, but that was according to the Reapers of course.

Averis appeared behind Saren and announced, "Master, there is some evidence of ruins on the surface of the planet, especially on its southern hemisphere." That was all Saren needed to hear.

Sovereign came about and headed toward the southern half of the lush garden world at maximum speed.

Twenty minutes later, Sovereign had landed on the surface of the planet. Just before landing on the jungle world, Saren had summoned Benezia and Averis to his sanctum and ordered, "You two will go forth onto the surface of this world and find the Conductor. You will not return without it."

Averis simply grunted in displeasure while Benezia nervously asked, "What if the artifact is not here? Or if we don't find it but find a map or a clue telling us where it may lie?"

Saren replied, "Anything that reveals the possible location of the Conductor will suffice in that case."

As soon as Saren finished giving his orders, he closed the door to his sanctum leaving Benezia and Averis standing in silence. They went to the Sovereign's main airlock access bay and checked the sensor data one more time. The planet was covered by a thick and humid oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere and its average temperature was a balmy 34C. However a warning was present on the display that mentioned the presence of biological contaminants and high carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, both of which made exosuits a requirement.

Averis and Benezia donned their exosuits and disembarked from the Sovereign. Upon stepping out onto the planet's surface, they couldn't help but be stunned by the lush beauty this planet had. Huge trees, beds of exotic flowers, and sprawling fern-like plants extended in all directions, making this world a feast for the senses to be sure. Averis studied his NAV computer, which showed the destination just six kilometers northeast of their position.

Averis spoke on the radio link, "Benezia, I've got a fix on the ruins we're supposed to go to. Come." She ran toward Averis and followed him as he made his way to the ruins.

After three hours of slogging through the mud they finally came to their destination. A huge ruined complex surrounded them on three sides. All of its windows were missing and plants had overgrown the ancient building, but its size made it so that Averis and Benezia couldn't help but feel awed by the imposing complex before them. After a minute of staring at the huge building, they went in through the huge doorway and found themselves standing inside a cavernous lobby.

Averis commented, "These don't look like Prothean ruins."

Benezia added, "They look far olderâ€¦"

They cautiously walked inside and discovered a huge mess of debris scattered all over the room. Without a word Averis left Benezia and explored the ground floor of the building, half expecting there to be an underground section of the complex, but after an hour he found nothing to indicate that there was ever an underground level at all. He returned to Benezia once he was done.

Averis explained, "If the Conductor is here, it'll be above us. While we're up there, be very careful of where you step. Who knows how old this building isâ€¦"

Benezia replied, "It's amazing how this building is even standing. Whoever was here built it to last."

"For sure, now let's move out. I have a bad feeling about this place." Averis' firm tone highlighted the almost palpable feeling of \_something\_ watching them.

They made their way to the only flight of stairs that wasn't blocked in by debris and cautiously walked up. Unlike the ground floor, the second floor was strangely devoid of debris and the plants had overgrown the entire area, which caused them to activate their Omni-tool blades to cut a path through it.

As they were cutting through the plants, Averis remarked, "You know, I'll bet that the Conductor isn't even on this planet. We've seen nothing to indicate such a relic here at all."

Benezia mentally agreed with Averis but she had to follow Saren's orders down to the letter, "Saren is certain that the Conductor is on this world, in fact here at these very ruins. This \_is\_ the largest complex on this planet after all. It would only make senseâ€¦"

"Then why haven't we seen any kind of evidence for it yet? If it's as powerful as Saren says, surely there must be \_something\_ to indicate its presence here."

Benezia shrugged in response and turned away from Averis, thus bringing an end to the conversation.

They continued searching the ruined complex for more than a couple hours but there was no evidence whatsoever that indicated that the Conductor was ever here. Also there were absolutely no signs of life other than the occasional native animal and the plants that were \_everywhere\_.

Averis grimly explained the situation over COM, "Master, we have uncovered nothing that indicates the Conductor has ever been on this planet at all. Is it possible that the Reapers may have been inaccurate?"

"\_You vex me greatly by daring to insinuate that the Reapers are fallible. While you've been milling about on that planet, I have received word that the Reapers themselves had been deceived by their source.\_"

Benezia chimed in, "What do you mean by deceived? How would anyone be

able to deceive the Reapers?"

"\_I know not. The Reapers have just told me that the Conductor lies elsewhere. They do not know the location itself yet, but I am confident that they will discover it before long. Return to the ship and let us leave this world.\_"

**\*\*DECEMBER 18, 2609. ARCTURUS STATION.\*\***

Arcturus Station was abuzz with high class citizens, diplomats, and dignitaries from each of the member species of the Confederation. Human, Sangheili, and Lekgolo all united as one. There was an exception to this homogeneous society, a defector from an outsider species that was technically at war with the Confederation itself. The person in question was a Turian, and of all the billions of people of his own species in the galaxy, he was alone within the nexus of Confederation power. This person was Garrus Vakarian.

Garrus had just been given asylum status in the Confederation, but he was still confined to Arcturus Station pending citizenship approval. While he was no prisoner, having been assigned spacious quarters and a guide to attend to his needs and show him around the station; he still felt like a prisoner nevertheless.

He was given a notice a few minutes prior to report to the ArcSec facility to go over some "details" but due to his long career in C-Sec, that meant a problemâ€¦ for him. Garrus still felt that he had to follow the instructions, so he left his quarters and followed his Omni-tool's map to the facility. When he arrived, the titanium door slid open without a sound much like it had two months before. After a second's hesitation, he walked in and waited patiently in the processing room.

The same agent who had interrogated Garrus two months ago walked into the room and greeted him, "Hello there, Garrus. I hope our accommodations are to your liking."

"Yes, they are quite comfortable. I also appreciate the fact that I am well supplied with food for those with a dextro-amino biology such as myself."

The agent replied with a respectful tone, "Yes, we here in the Confederation greatly respect and make a strong effort to learn about any other species as a part of our overarching goal to promote unity and camaraderie in Confederation space, and hopefully throughout the galaxy itself. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of the Citadel, from which you have exiled yourself."

Garrus asked, "The Confederation really is a benevolent entity, unlike what Citadel propaganda and rumors now circulate."

The agent now looked despondent, "The Citadel doesn't know that we humans were embroiled in an unprovoked, brutal, and genocidal war against an alien power that virtually outclassed us in terms of technology. They were \_hellbent \_on destroying us down to every last man, woman, and child; and our salvation came only once we had encountered and unlocked the technology of an ancient race that just happened to be our enemy's gods."

Garrus was now quite curious, "The Protheans?"

"No, by an extremely advanced race who came before. They were called the Forerunners."

Garrus replied with a skeptical tone, "I could hardly compare the Forerunners to the Protheans, who had created the Citadel and the Relays 50,000 years ago."

"The Forerunners were far more advanced, I'm sorry to sayâ€¦ and the Forerunners' apex of power was \_100,000\_ years ago." That astonished Garrus.

The agent's eyes locked with Garrus', "But I digress, now for the matter at handâ€¦"

Garrus inquired, "Something tells me that the entire reason for your visit wasn't to check up on how I'm doing and to debate with each other about ancient civilizationsâ€¦ right?"

"Quite right. You're a perceptive one for sure, Garrus Vakarian."

"Someone has to be." Garrus chuckled.

"Well, the reason why you have been summoned here is that the Confederation Senate has \_finally\_ agreed to award you provisional citizenship, effective immediately. Leave it to politicians to drag out their debates like that, while we are left toâ€¦"

Garrus interrupted, "Provisional? I take it there areâ€¦ conditions?"

The agent sat down in a chair, "Yes, there is only one condition. You must become an agent for UNSCINTA, for you have been chosen by aâ€¦ highly influential agent for a top secret mission. Are you willing to work with us?"

Garrus asked with a very inquisitive tone, "What is the nature of this mission?"

"I personally do not know the details, except that I've been explicitly ordered to bring you to a top secret UNSCINTA facility so you can discover the answer for yourself. Keep in mind that your role in this mission is not required, but it is \_strongly\_ recommended as your chance of full citizenship depends on it."

Garrus' face now took on a very pleased expression, "I think it already beats the hell out of my dead end career at C-Sec and I've been aching for some real action for a long time, soâ€¦ I am yours."

"Perfect. We leave immediately."

**\*\*DECEMBER 20, 2609. UNSCINTA DELPHI TRAINING FACILITY. REACH, EPSILON ERIDANI SYSTEM.\*\***

In the two month long UNSCINTA training regimen, Initiate Alexandra Wierzbowski's mind swelled with the knowledge that she had "absorbed" from her subliminal training, and her body was exceptionally lithe

and fit following her physical application training.

During that training she had sustained several serious injuries, including one where she had lost a life-threatening amount of blood. Because of that particularly grievous injury, she had skirted the edge of receiving a medical disqualification, but thanks to her father and a remarkable recovery she was able to remain in UNSCINTA.

If one looked at her now they would expect her to be riddled with scars, but thanks to a new rejuvenating biomaterial that UNSCINTA now uses, all of her injuries were completely healed with no scars left behind. This new biomaterial fascinated her deeply so she endeavored to find out what it was, and after some effort the UNSCINTA medical officers finally let her in on that secret. It was called Medi-gel.

Medi-gel was conceived from a UNSCINTA project to replace biofoam as the primary medical restoration agent of the Confederation. Unlike most of the projects undertaken by humanity, Medi-gel was not based on Forerunner technology, instead it was a purely human invention. The project had come to fruition in 2605, but Medi-gel remains too costly for mass production and usage throughout the Confederation, so biofoam is still widely used.

Initiate Wierzbowski entered the mess hall and noticed Initiate Ramirez wolfing down a rehydrated instant meal. Upon further examination of his meal she recoiled in disgust at its watery appearance, which elicited an amused remark from Ramirez, "Ha, looks nasty eh? You know, with some flavoring powder it's actually not half bad. Want some?" He held up a forkful of food before Wierzbowski's face and she went pale at the sight of it. Ramirez erupted in a hearty laugh at her reaction.

As the two Initiates sat in the mess hall, someone suddenly spoke on the intercom, "Overseer Wierzbowski and Initiates Wierzbowski and Ramirez, you are to report to Administration immediately."

Both Initiates got up and ran out of the mess hall as quickly as they could, but they were also surprised at why Administration wanted them.

\_Administration already has a task for us, just within one week until the end of training?\_

Once both of the Initiates arrived at their destination they noticed the Overseer whose face was beet red with anger, and when he noticed them he ordered, "You two don't say anything unless you're spoken to. I don't know what the hell they want, but it had best be something bloody important since they had just disturbed \_my\_ training session."

Both of the Initiates nodded. They walked into the Administrations Office with no expectations on what was to happen, and then they stood at attention in the darkened room.

A gruff voice was the first to speak, "We apologize for having to call you away from your training, but there is an extremely important development of which we had just become aware of."

The Overseer tersely replied, "Yea, it had better be."

Another voice spoke with a venomous tone in his voice, "Be silent, Overseer. Need I remind you that you are no longer the highest ranking agent at DELPHI."

"I apologize, High Overseer Mikhailovich."

The gruff voice that spoke earlier explained, "We have called the three of you here for a special purpose. Initiates Wierzbowski and Ramirez have both attained much distinction in the subliminal retention and the physical applications tests.

High Overseer Mikhailovich leaned forward so that his face was in view, "Initiate Wierzbowski and Initiate Ramirez. You will go to a newly discovered planet far outside Confederation space in order to retrieve a Forerunner artifact. You will also have special aid during your mission."

The two initiates were stunned into silence. They could only manage to slightly nod their heads.

Overseer Wierzbowski yelled, "How the hell did you come by that information?!"

"A confidential source on a need to know basis I will say nothing more than that, Overseer."

"So you would have my daughter and Initiate Ramirez go to some unknown planet to retrieve a Forerunner artifact that may or may not exist? That sort of task sounds like it requires a full unit of Operatives!"

"You yourself have stated to her that she was to receive no preferential treatment. And besides, did I not say that she and Ramirez would have aid during this mission?"

The Overseer's shoulders slumped in defeat as he conceded, "I know that is true, sir."

The High Overseer's face abruptly changed to an expression of anger, "That sort of outburst will not be tolerated any further \_Overseer\_. You are dismissed!"

Overseer Wierzbowski promptly left the office without uttering a word.

The High Overseer turned toward the Initiates, "You will report to the ARCHON facility to receive your new equipment and augmentations, and then you will journey to this planet to find this artifact. Do you understand the orders that which you had been given?"

Both replied flatly, "Yes sir."

Wierzbowski had no idea that her father's heart had just been crushed. The idea of his own daughter going out on the kind of dangerous mission that was more suited for an entire \_squad\_ of Operatives must have felt like hell for him.

Both of the Initiates saluted and filed out of the Administration



Office.

The two Initiates left the Admin office and went to the Barracks to pack and prepare for the trip to the ARCHON facility. Not a word was spoken from either of them, as they were still stunned by the huge task they had been givenâ€¦ by a High Overseer even.

After an hour Overseer Wierzbowski came to them, "It is time."

Both Initiates quickly grabbed their packs and followed the Overseer to the Dock. Once they arrived, they noticed that there was naught but a sleek black ship docked there. The Overseer explained with a hint of pride, "This is the Shade-class stealth corvette \_Darkest Night\_. These new ships have the most advanced active camouflage devices ever conceived for any ship."

Initiate Wierzbowski asked, "The most advanced active camouflage? Really?"

"Yup. This ship can be invisible to the entire electromagnetic spectrum when the special active camouflage field is activated."

Ramirez remarked, "So, this ship can do a smooth and quick penetration into hostile territory and pull out just like that?"

The Overseer smiled at Ramirez's veiled use of innuendo, "Yup, in and out unsuspected and undetected."

As the Initiates stood there studying the ship's sleek and streamlined hull, the Overseer commanded, "Inside now. We must go to the ARCHON facility at once. High Overseer Mikhailovich is known for many things, and patience is not among them."

Right when the Overseer said that, everyone quickly entered the ship through the airlock. The Initiates took their seats in the cramped Crew Area while the Overseer added, "This ship possesses one of the fastest Slipspace drives ever designed, so don't get \_too \_comfortable. And Alexâ€¦ be safe and know that I love you and that I'm proud of you." Right when he finished that statement, the Overseer promptly left without another word.

The ship's intercom boomed with a very deep voice laced with sarcasm, "It's good of you to fit us into your busy schedules, Initiates. Welcome to the \_Darkest Night\_. \_We're about to disembark, so buckle up."

The ship shook as it detached itself from the dock supports and then gravity pinned the Initiates into their seats as the ship swung around and shot up through the huge vertical passage to the surface. The windows on either side of the Crew Area showed nothing but whiteout on the surface, since there was a blizzard currently raging in the DELPHI Zone.

The Initiates watched as the white sky quickly turned into blue, then black as the ship exited Reach's atmosphere. Titanium cover plates slid into place over the windows as the \_Darkest Night\_ began to transition into Slipspace for its journey to the semi-legendary ARCHON facility.

**\*\*DECEMBER 20, 2609. UNSCINTA WEAPONS RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT FACILITY CODENAME "ARCHON", ERIS, SOL SYSTEM.\*\***

The Darkest Night transitioned out of Slipspace near the frozen planet Eris. ARCHON was not on its surface, but rather it was in a geosynchronous orbit above its equatorial region. The titanium window coverings opened to reveal the cold expanse of space and the grey dwarf planet to the Initiates. The facility itself was visible as a small black spot near the planet.

The ship rotated to show Sol itself, whose light radiated bright but feeble at this massive distance from the star. Initiate Wierzbowski nudged Ramirez's shoulder and commented, "Quite an appropriate place for a top secret facility, no?"

Ramirez looked upon the planet for a moment, then at Wierzbowski, "This place is practically a freezer. I just hope I can get a hot shower when we get there..."

The Initiates watched as the Darkest Night swiftly approached the jet-black space station. Someone spoke on the intercom, "We have arrived at the UNSCINTA ARCHON facility. Remain seated until we have hard dock."

The ship maneuvered itself into a position for docking and an airlock bridge began to extend to meet the Darkest Night's own airlock, and the ship shook slightly as they made contact. The Initiates waited for further instruction, which came when a female UNSCINTA agent walked into the Crew Area. She ordered, "Come. You are to report to the Processing Area immediately."

The two Initiates followed her wordlessly and they gasped in wonder at the spotless metal walls and floor of the ARCHON station. The agent noticed their fascination and explained, "ARCHON was built to test some of the more radical technology that we possess. Since you two have clearance I am allowed to tell you that the new MJOLNIR X armor is slated to be tested today here, at this very station."

Wierzbowski replied with a slightly indignant tone, "But we're not Spartans. We cannot use that armor."

"Quite right. You are not Spartans, but you will have the aid of one for your mission."

"How do you know?"

The agent cryptically replied, "Information and rumors travel faster than light."

Wierzbowski was now irritated, "What are you talking about?"

The agent remained silent. Wierzbowski's questions would have to wait.

The two initiates followed the agent until they came to what looked to be a large reception atrium with a huge window overlooking the dark expanse of space. The only furnishings here were three metal chairs, a table, and a desk with what looked to be an extremely bored agent reclining in his chair. The agent that the initiates had been

following suddenly vanished.

The bored receptionist noticed them and sat up in his chair, "Welcome Initiates Wierzbowski and Ramirez!" His enthusiasm sounded contrived.

Wierzbowski flashed him a weary smile while Ramirez replied with surprise evident in his voice, "Thank youâ€| sir?"

The reception agent stood up and motioned for them to follow. As they followed the agent, he began, "It's nice to see new faces here at this lonely station. For perhaps 99% of the time, there are no more than thirty people in this facility at any one time. Since ARCHON is classified above top secret, these thirty people are committed to this facility for life. The only visitors we get is a logistics crew once a year, bringing in message disks from family members spread throughout Confederation space as well as seeds for our hydroponic farming module."

Ramirez was now immensely curious, "The personnel here are lifers?"

"Yup. We're all sworn to secrecy under pain of death. The technology here is on the bleeding edge of our current progress in unlocking the full extent of Forerunner technology. It would beâ€| a problem if any of it found its way in the hands of anyone else."

Ramirez's curiosity was not yet sated, "So the only visitors you usually get are logistic crews once a year?"

"Correct. The logistic crew responsible for freight delivery to this facility is bound under the same oath of absolute secrecy that we are. Their manifests will only show random civilian cargo deliveries to various Confederation colonies in case of capture, and each crewman possesses a suicide pill full of liquid potassium cyanide."

"Sounds hardcore."

Wierzbowski chimed in, "Soâ€| all of this secrecy is required because of the technology on board this station. May I ask what kind of technology this would be?"

The agent stopped and locked eyes with her, "I cannot answer that, but I can tell you that you will see for yourself soon enough."

Both Initiates quickly asked in unison, "And we have clearance, yes?"

"Yes. Someone must have a lot of pull within UNSCINTA to get you here, because you two are the first Initiates to have this level of clearance sinceâ€| well... ever."

The Initiates were about to respond when the agent stopped in front of a featureless titanium door. He faced them and flatly stated, "This is your stop. I do not have clearance to accompany you any further, so I bid you good day and good luck in there." He abruptly left as soon as he finished.

The titanium door began to slide open without a sound to reveal a

featureless metal room with a single light in the center illuminating a small table and three chairs, and in the far corner from the entrance there was a large automated pulse laser turret aimed directly at the table. The sight of the turret filled the two Initiates with a gnawing fear but they retained their composure and tentatively stepped into the cold and uninviting room.

A hidden door opened to reveal a man with impeccably trimmed dark brown hair with grey streaks, and he wore an immaculate black uniform devoid of any insignia or medals. The man's appearance was like a perfectionist's dream, and the two Initiates could do naught but stare at the man in reverent awe. He looked upon them with electric blue eyes that literally glowed of their own accord, and the Initiates' own eyes were drawn into his like something falling into a black hole.

The man never took his gaze off the Initiates as he sat down, and he still remained silent as if waiting for someone else to speak. A full minute had passed before he began to speak with an icy voice, "I think you are wondering as to who I am."

It was Wierzbowski's turn for curiosity to show its hand, "Yes. You. My father has told me stories about you."

The man shifted in his chair and spoke without the icy tone this time, "Ah yes, Overseer Victor Wierzbowski is a good man. He and High Overseer Mikhailovich hate each other's guts still, right?" A hearty laugh erupted from the man as he said that.

"I suppose so, sir."

The man abruptly stopped laughing and his eyes seemed to glow slightly brighter as he continued, "You may be wondering how you, being two new Initiates, had managed to receive a mission of the utmost importance to humanity, and also how you've been able to gain access to the most secure facility in the galaxy..."

Ramirez interjected, "Yes. Why us?"

"Then it'll certainly come as a surprise to learn that I was the architect of this mission. I have chosen you two based on your merit and ability that you have demonstrated during training." His attention focused on Wierzbowski, "You have acquired the highest marks I've seen for quite some time in the fields of technological and medical expertise. Your mind has an extremely prodigious level of understanding in the computer science, programming, and engineering aspects of the subliminal package. That, coupled with the immense medical knowledge that you have obtained from ADVMEDSPEC, combine to make one hell of a combination for you, Initiate Wierzbowski. I must admit that I am rather envious of your talents."

Wierzbowski felt pride well up in her heart, "Thank you sir. I don't know what to say."

The man turned to face Ramirez, "And you, Initiate Ramirez, have demonstrated unparalleled expertise with the martial and marksmanship aspects of both the subliminal and physical phases of training. You are a peerless warrior who will be honed to absolute perfection during your career in the UNSCINTA."

Ramirez could only manage to say, "Thank you, sir."

Wierzbowski asked, "Ok, so who are you exactly and why is there a big pulse laser turret pointed right at the three of us?"

"This is the most secure room in the galaxy. The reason why? Because it's one of my briefing rooms. As for the pulse laser turret, it doesn't concern me as I'm not even here in the physical sense."

"What do you mean, sir?"

The man folded his hands and leaned forward, "This room contains the most advanced communications equipment in the known galaxy. I am, in all actuality, far away from this facility in a remote location. You are talking to a holographic avatar made of hard light, and I am communicating with you via the method of Quantum Entanglement communication. Ah the wonders of Forerunner technology!"

Ramirez asked, "What is Quantum Entanglement?"

"While I'm not a physicist, I know the basics. Quantum Entanglement is the principle in which two particles, though completely separate from each other, still maintain symmetric equality in their quantum states, be it polarization, spin, etc. In layman's terms it means that two particular particles are essentially identical, and whenever one particle is manipulated, the other is instantly 'changed' as well regardless of distance. You can have two particles separated from each other by billions of light years and still each particle would experience its companion's 'change' instantaneously. We are now able to enact these changes at will to send messages instantly to one another. As you can probably tell, it's quite invaluable for superluminal communications."

Wierzbowski asked with immense curiosity evident in her tone, "Why isn't this used by the whole of the Confederation?"

The holographic avatar replied simply, "While QEC is revolutionary in its design, it still has its drawbacks. One is that QEC still commands a massive expense, and two is that the communications bitrate is extremely low. It's not that dissimilar to the old 'dial-up' internet that we had used centuries ago, but fortunately there has been some progress in increasing the bitrate."

Ramirez cut in, "You still haven't given us your orders or even your name, sir."

The avatar sat straight in the chair, "Right now your orders are to equip yourselves and receive some minor augmentations to supplement your skills for this highly dangerous mission. And as for me, I am known as the Illusive Man."

With that, the avatar wavered and disappeared into nothing, leaving both of the Initiates sitting there in silence. They had just met the legendary Illusive Man himself, albeit through a holographic intermediary. A UNSCINTA agent walked into the room and motioned for them to follow him. Eventually they found themselves in a cavernous chamber with gear of all types lining the walls to their sides.

Another agent walked in with an exotic-looking alien behind him. The two Initiates couldn't help but stare at the alien, who was of a species none of them had seen before; and to their surprise he spoke perfect English, "Hello, I am Garrus Vakarian. I am a Turian, one of the leading races of the Citadel."

Ramirez visibly tensed and his eyes blazed with a fiery hatred at the mention of Citadel.

Garrus quickly shouted, "Relax. I'm with the Confederation now."

A woman's voice marked by a distinctive Australian accent confirmed the alien's statement, "It's true, Garrus has been given provisional citizenship and will obtain full citizenship once he completes his mission."

Ramirez asked with a suspicious tone, "And what mission might that be?"

"The same one that you have been given. He is here on the orders of the Illusive Man himself, just like you."

Ramirez let down his guard slightly. Wierzbowski however remained indifferent for she was not as prejudiced toward others as her companion.

The woman who spoke before suddenly materialized right in front of everyone else. She was clad in a sleek, form-fitting set of what looked like some type of stealth armor. Her face was obscured with a polarized faceplate. She introduced herself with an icy tone, "I am Elite Operative Miranda Lawson. I have been commanded by the Illusive Man to get you accommodated to your equipment," she hesitantly added, "And also I am to accompany you on your mission."

Ramirez was amazed, "Where the hell can I get that kind of armor?!" Wierzbowski's eyes seemed to convey the same question.

Lawson's ice queen personality seemed to relent, as her voice and demeanor were now friendlier, "Sooner than you think, Ramirez. I knew that you guys would be like kids in a candy store."

Wierzbowski asked, "Will we be using this armor during our mission?"

Lawson's faceplate retracted into her helmet to reveal her face. Ramirez's eyes instantly fixated upon her and his heart skipped a beat, and her appearance even gave Wierzbowski some pause. Operative Lawson was beautiful to say the least.

She answered, "Yes. This armor is called the AIS. I have forwarded basic information about it to your personal datapads already. I'd advise you all to study it."

Both Initiates consulted their personal datapads that they had been issued upon joining the UNSCINTA. A data entry for the AIS was already highlighted on the displays, so they opened it and read.

AIS (Advanced Infiltration Suit) Specifications and

Information.\_

\_The AIS armor is directly based on the Semi-powered Infiltration armor that the Spartan IIIs were equipped with during the Human-Covenant War. Due to radical advances in the miniaturization of its technology, the AIS has taken the form of a sleek, form-fitting black suit, unlike its predecessors. This streamlined suit's design has many practical applications, including reducing bulk and the chance of loose gear making noise as it shifts during normal operation. \_

\_To enhance stealth capabilities, the AIS is equipped with an advanced active camouflage generator in the belt of the unit that is able to provide up to ten minutes of near-total invisibility. Unlike its predecessors, the AIS Active Camouflage system generators possess heat sinks that are installed within them to greatly reduce their thermal signatures. These factors combine to produce a unit that gives its user the ability to enjoy a distinct advantage in the field of clandestine warfare. \_

\_For protection this unit possesses energy shielding, although the purpose of the AIS is not to take punishment but rather to avoid combat situations whenever possible. Because of that, the shielding is not nearly as powerful as the shielding installed within the MJOLNIR armor or even the standard issue Powered Combat Suit (PCS) that Marines are presently equipped with in combat zones.\_

\_This unit also possesses a crystal matrix not unlike that which is employed in MJOLNIR armor that is designed to accommodate standard UNSCINTA computer hackware protocols. However, to reduce power requirements and weight, the matrix is much less dense and far thinner than the MJOLNIR equivalent. This factor eliminates the AIS' ability to store and accommodate a true AI.\_

Garrus remarked, "Never have I thought that the Confederation would already possess real cloaking armor. I had a friend who managed the SPECTRE supply station in C-Sec and even they don't have armor \_this \_advanced."

A powerful voice that seemed to command respect from all who heard it came from behind them, "Then prepare to be blown away."

Out from the shadow of the door behind them stepped a tall and imposing figure clad in olive green armor, which was devoid of any identifying marks except one that was etched onto the soldier's MJOLNIR armor pauldrons. It depicted only three numbersâ€|  
\_117\_.

\_\*\*Z0MG! ITZ DA MASTUR CHEEF! OMGWTFBBQZ0RZ!1 ! Lol\*\*\_

\_\*\*I hope you have enjoyed this chapter. Please review and favorite if you desire.\*\*\_

\_\*\*It will be a few days or so before the next chapter is ready, but I can promise you one thingâ€| it'll be a feast for the imagination as well as one hell of a ride. \*\*\_

**\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\***

**\_\*\*WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS A LOT OF CONTENT THAT MAY DISTURB OR FRIGHTEN SOME SENSITIVE READERS. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*First I want to address some complaints, especially about the Illusive Man being included in my fic.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*For the time being, no one knows TIM's true intentions or even his identity. And he isn't in charge of the entire UNSCINTA either, as you'll see within this fic. Keep in mind that in ME2, TIM was willing to work with (certain) aliens as long as they ultimately served his own agenda. This is reflected by his willingness to have Garrus aboard for the secret mission.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*To put all that in a summary: Even though TIM is a nice guy for now, I do have plans for TIM and I did know what I was doing when I included him in this role. Just bear with me please, lolz.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*Another reviewer mentioned that Garrus' eagerness to defect and potentially betray his own race clashes against his own altruistic personality.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*Garrus has implied numerous times in canon that he hates corruption and crime above all things. It is quite fitting for him to view the Council as the most corrupt organization in the galaxy and that his own species needs to be rescued from it.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*Now I'll conclude this by saying that everyone has to keep in mind that this is an extremely AU fic after all.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*One more thing, I'll start referring to more characters by their first names. Especially Alexandra Wierzbowski, as I'm starting to get tired of always having to type out her last name. If any of you prefer the original naming setup, let me know in your reviews. The majority answer from ten reviewers will determine that decision.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*With that out of the way, I invite you to read and enjoy this chapter like I have enjoyed writing it.\*\*\_**

**\_\*\*And now I give youâ€¦\*\*\_**

**\*\*CHAPTER 7: THE DEAD PLANET.\*\***

**\*\*DECEMBER 20, 2609. UNSCINTA ARCHON FACILITY. ERIS, SOL SYSTEM.\*\***

The two Initiates could hardly believe their eyes. Standing before them, like some mythological figure given substance, was the hero of the Great War himself. The savior of mankind. Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 in the flesh.

Even Garrus felt a sense of awe as he beheld the legendary soldier and he could tell that the man had seen more action in his lifetime than anyone in the Hierarchy itself.

The Master Chief began with a commanding tone, "This mission is



vastly more important than any of you can even imagine. This is why I will be going with you to see that it is done."

Alexandra timidly asked, "What kind of artifact is this anyways?"

"I have been told by someone, that a dangerous Forerunner artifact is hidden somewhere on this planet that we are supposed to go to." That piqued everyone's curiosity. "Some of you may know this already, but for those of you who don't I will elaborate..."

Miranda cut in, "Sorry Chief, but we really have to get everyone ready for their augments."

Alex nervously asked, "What kind of augmentations?"

"Minor ones. Both of you will receive new chips that will increase your ability to interface with computers directly, rather than having to use a haptic interface. Ramirez will receive a vision enhancement package designed to increase the spatial resolution of your natural eyesight which will make you that much more accurate and alert in combat situations."

A terrified expression painted Ramirez's features at the mention of that, "Oh great. You spooks can't wait to cut into me already."

"Relax, these are being installed into your suit's helmet, as we do not have the time for actual bodily augmentations aside from the implants. But that is just a simple fifteen minute operation."

Alex asked, "What else will there be for me?"

"You'll receive an automatic medi-gel dispenser that will be grafted onto the suit's left arm."

"Wouldn't everyone else also receive one for their own use?"

"Yes, but in a combat situation you will likely find that you may not be able to think about such things. Don't worry, the Illusive Man has a \_special\_ package in mind for you upon mission completion."

It was Alex's turn to feel afraid at that, "Special? What do you mean by that?"

Miranda fell silent. Once again Alex's questions would have to wait.

Garrus spoke up, "So uh Chief. Did you serve in that huge war that humans had fought in a half century ago?"

The Chief stopped in his tracks but still remained silent. Miranda scolded Garrus, "The Chief has seen a lot of valiant men and women die in that war. It affects him even to this day. Now is not the time."

Garrus turned to the Chief, "Even though I have no idea what happened during your war, I am still sorry for what you have suffered through."

The Spartan turned to face the Turian, "You are correct in that you

have no idea of what I or all of humanity, for that matter, have gone through." The force evident in the Chief's voice made everyone in the room fall silent, and Garrus hung his head in sorrow.

The Chief's tone warmed, "And with that said I forgive you, for you had no idea just like you said. But please, do not bring up the War in front of me anymore." That order was directed at everyone, but no one heard his thoughts.

\_For me the grief is still all too near.\_

Everyone nodded in understanding and filed out of the room, leaving Miranda alone with the Chief. She remarked, "It's good that you're with us Chief."

The Chief snapped, "Let me make something perfectly clear. I do not serve you or your 'Illusive Man', nor do I trust either of you. I am here as a part of a request from the CDF to represent their interests in this mission. That is \_all\_. Understood?" He withheld the fact that his presence was for his own interests as well.

Miranda raised her hands in a placating gesture and backed out of the room.

The Chief had orders to report to the Special Equipment Module. He was to test the new MJOLNIR Mk. X armor, except the testing would not occur on the station. He would test it in the field during the mission. He studied the armor specifications on his personal datapad.

\_-begin file "MJOLNIR X"-\_

\_UNSCINTA Encryption level: Black.\_

\_The act of unauthorized dissemination of this classified material to any party that lacks appropriate clearance to view such material shall be punishable by summary execution as per UNSCINTA Protocol Code 16 (Classified Material Security Protocol).\_

\_MJOLNIR Mk. X Armor Specifications.\_

\_This unit is a refinement of the Mk. IX generation. Rather than including a full inventory of features, instead a list of changes will be included in this file.\_

\_The MJOLNIR Mk. X unit features improved shielding that is approximately 10% more resilient than the Mk IX. It is also approximately 18% more power-efficient due to certain advances such as \_\_\*\*REDACTED\*\*\_\_ in the MJOLNIR deuterium-tritium fusion pack.

\_

\_The MJOLNIR Mk. X unit also features improved dampening fluid dynamics that provides up to 25% more performance in situations where the subject might encounter high gravitational acceleration. Examples include falling from heights and being struck by an object moving at high velocity. The mechanism of action is as follows:

\_\_\*\*REDACTED\*\*\_\_.\_

\_These changes combine to provide improved capabilities for the subject when equipped with the Mk. X unit.\_

\_\_-End file-\_\_

The Chief chuckled at the fact that the UNSCINTA spooks never neglected to "omit" some of the tender details about the technology in the new armor; but he also understood the reason behind their secrecy since the armor was still brand new. He stowed the datapad in his armor's storage compartment and continued on his way to the Special Equipment Module to receive the new MJOLNIR armor.

-ooo-ooo-

After everyone spent the rest of the previous day getting accommodated to their new gear, they assembled in the ARCHON station dock. Miranda walked up to them and explained, "Alright everyone, today's the day that we begin this mission. I don't know what we'll find on this planet, but I'm certain we'll find \_something \_there."

The Chief added, "All of you will defer to either Miranda or I. She has official command of this mission, but command will pass to me once we set foot on the planet as it will be considered a combat zone. Any questions?"

Garrus spoke up, "Yea, I have one. What are we waiting for?"

The Chief chuckled, "Right now, Garrus. We'll be hitching a ride on one of the most advanced ships in all the Confederation," he glared at Miranda, "Your Illusive Man has ensured that we'll receive all we need to get this mission done."

As if on cue, the \_Darkest Night \_materialized before them in the docking bay. Everyone waited for the airlock bridge to extend before boarding the ship. As soon as everyone was inside, the \_Darkest Night \_left the dock.

Garrus clenched onto the armrests of his seat as the ship began to accelerate in preparation of entering Slipspace. Miranda noticed his apprehension and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Still new to your method of FTL, that's all."

Just as Garrus finished his sentence, the \_Darkest Night \_entered the non-dimensional realm of Slipspace.

\*\*DECEMBER 22, 2609. SYSTEM 82420, PLANET THREE.\*\*

The \_Darkest Night\_ transitioned out of Slipspace and the team found themselves looking at what could be best described as a cold and bleak system of planets orbiting a dim red dwarf star. The planet that was their destination orbited its feeble star just within the outside edge of its habitable zone, and upon further scrutiny with the ship's ultra-precise cameras, it appeared to be the perfect example of a dead planet.

Miranda began, "We're here. The planet in question hosts a vast ruined city on its northern hemisphere, which is where the Illusive Man thinks this artifact might be hidden."

The Chief explained, "This planet lies on the far side of the galaxy from the Confederation, and even outside Citadel space, so we have no idea what to expect here. The Confederation has just discovered this planet last year and, in turn discovered these ruins a few months after. They don't exactly look like Forerunner ruins, but then again the closest look we've had so far was from a Slipspace recon probe at a distance of more than six AUs."

Miranda continued, "Our ETA is fourteen minutes, so let's suit up and get ready." Everyone dispersed to prepare themselves for the mission.

Once everyone was suited up and kitted out, they assembled in the Airlock Bay to await orders. Everyone except Garrus and the Chief were clad in the sleek AIS armor which made them look like the quintessential stereotypical appearance of black ops agents.

Ramirez was equipped with the silenced MA-59S SpecOps-variant rifle and four M9 frag grenades, just in case things went wrong. He was a Marine to the core, even with the training he had obtained in the UNSCINTA.

Both Alex and Miranda decided for a more minimalist approach by bringing only a silenced M6D/S pistol and a combat knife for each of them, but that would not diminish their effectiveness. Alex had received commendations for her remarkable skill in stealth and Miranda was a peerless specialist with the pistol.

Garrus had his own full set of standard issue C-Sec armor and he was armed with both a Krysaer Sniper Rifle and a Phaeston Assault Rifle, both of which he had 'appropriated' from the C-Sec Armory before he left.

The Chief stuck with his old standby, an old BR55 battle rifle that had been customized to accommodate a silencer on the barrel. He liked the MA-59 magnetic rail rifles but he was always hesitant to replace his trusty BR55.

Once everyone was ready, Miranda explained, "Before we go outside, you \_have \_to ensure that your suits are sealed. The temperature outside is -58.2C and while the atmosphere is of the regular oxygen-nitrogen mix, the pressure is less than 0.3% of Earth Standard."

Alex inquired, "How could the Forerunners have lived in these conditions, if they were ever here?"

The Chief theorized, "Perhaps the Flood attacked this remote colony and the Forerunners responded by glassing most of the planet to eliminate the infestation, which would have caused most of the atmosphere to boil away."

Miranda rebutted, "While it is known that planetary glassing can destroy large portions of a planet's atmosphere, there has been no direct evidence of this planet ever \_being \_glassed."

"At any rate we'll find out more when we're outside."

The ship's AI announced, "Contact has been made with the surface of the planet. Please stand by for radiological analysis of outside

environment."

Alex huffed at the fact that they had to wait. The Chief ordered, "Conduct final suit checks. This is your last chance before we go outside." They did so and nodded once they were done.

A minute later the AI announced once more, "Analysis complete. Stellar wind output is elevated to a level of 15% higher than normal for a star of its type, but it is still within safe levels."

Miranda thought over the AI's announcement carefully, "The only way a dim red dwarf star like this could have that level of an output is if it were actually a variable star, but it can't be..." "Something doesn't add up."

The airlock began to cycle itself in preparation for the outside environment, and then the door opened to reveal the bleak surface of the dead world.

The images and data they had seen before landing have done this place no justice. The planet was the perfect example of a desolate, forgotten world. The planet's star hung high and dim in the gloomy star-studded sky, bathing everything around them in a deathly pale light. All that they heard upon stepping out was the icy wind blowing with a mournful sigh.

Alex was the first to speak over COM, "Talk about magnificent desolation!"

Miranda replied in annoyance, "Wierzbowski, keep your COM chatter to a minimum."

Everyone remained silent as they walked forward away from the ship, until a series of ruined columns eventually became visible in the distance. The Chief held up one gloved fist, signaling everyone to hold position. He scanned the area with his rifle for a moment and turned to the group, "We should head toward those columns, since there's an entire complex of ruins beyond them. Move out." Everyone complied and followed the Chief to the columns.

They had to climb a hill and scamper up a shallow wall before making it to the columns, but once they got there, they gasped in wonder at what they beheld.

A vast ruined city sprawled before them as far as they could see, and its ruined skyline was punctuated by three tall columns off in the distance. Ramirez surmised, "Those tall columns must have been skyscrapers long ago."

Miranda sardonically replied, "You are quite the observer, Ramirez."

The Chief held up his hand and they fell silent in response. He scanned the nearby buildings for anything out of the ordinary, but the whole place was silent like a tomb. He announced on COM, "There is a ten meter drop to the ground below. We need to rappel down."

Alex nervously eyed the drop below them as everyone hooked their lines to the top of the cliff and began to rappel down, and after

gathering her nerve she followed them down. The Chief was the first one to the ground and once he disconnected his line he dropped into a crouch, his rifle aimed at the buildings as if anticipating some unknown threat. Once he was satisfied that there were no hidden threats, he motioned for them to follow. They walked in a line with the Chief at point, then Ramirez, Miranda, Alex, and finally Garrus guarding their six.

Silence hung over the dead city like that in some long-forgotten tomb, save for the occasional crumbling sound of a piece of rubble coming loose from the ancient walls. The feeble light from the star above them caused everything around them to gleam with an ethereal glow, which gave an uneasy feeling to everyone.

All of a sudden a crumbling sound broke the silence behind them. Garrus whipped around with his Phaeston assault rifle aimed down the street behind them. \_Nothing.\_

The Turian stated, "It was just a rock."

Everyone relaxed at that and continued on their way, but Alex's gnawing anxiety did not abate as she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched by \_something\_ out there.

After what seemed to be an eternity spent combing through the maze-like ruins, the team came to a large building that appeared to be distinct from the others. \_Distinct means important\_.

The Chief broke the uneasy silence, "This building looks important. I'll bet something related to the artifact might be hidden within."

Ramirez walked toward the building's empty courtyard and studied the ancient glyphs lining the entrance. They looked completely alien to him, but yet they also seemed vaguely familiar. He announced over COM, "Hey, you guys might want to come over here and check this out."

"What?" asked Miranda with a highly curious tone.

"Looks like some type of alien writing all around the entrance here."

The Chief chimed in, "That isn't the only thing we seeâ€¦" Ramirez followed his gaze to his feet. There were scorch marks all over the place which stained the otherwise white tiled floor that had just been uncovered by their footsteps.

Ramirez asked incredulously, "What the hell happened here?"

"A battle." The Chief answered matter-of-factly. He stepped in front of Ramirez and studied the dark lobby that lay beyond the entrance. As he scanned the area beyond with his rifle, he stated, "Looks like some type of lobby or reception hall. Look at the desk right there." He pointed at a metal desk that was on the verge of crumbling into rust.

Ramirez and Miranda walked toward the metal desk and examined it for a moment. In the thousands of years since this place had last seen life, this place must have seemed like a lively center of activity

for this city. Alex depolarized her helmet's faceplate and looked upon everything with her own eyes. If one were especially observant, they would be able to see the nervous look in the young Initiate's eyes.

"This place gives me the creeps." Garrus' comment rang true with the entire team, and even the Chief must have been feeling some sense of dread in the tomb-like silence of the dead city.

The team left the lobby and found themselves in a cavernous atrium that lacked any kind of debris, save for a small pile off in a dark corner. The Chief scanned the room and then the exit at the far wall before everyone fanned out in the large atrium. Miranda gasped in wonder at the lofty ceiling that seemed to reach into the sky. A huge skylight let in the only light in the whole room but darkness still loomed over them like a curtain.

Alex slowly made her way to the debris pile in the corner and suddenly she yelped in fright at what she saw by her feet.

Everyone ran toward her and followed her terrified gaze to the pile on the floor.

\_Skeletons.\_

Alex stammered, "Theâ€¦ these areâ€¦"

The Chief finished her statement, "These look human. But it \_can't\_ beâ€¦ this is supposed to be a long-lost Forerunner colony."

Alex gathered her wits and dropped to a knee to study the pile of skeletons more closely. She eventually said, "These are definitely human corpses, but they look like they've been here for \_thousands\_ of years. How the heck is this possible?"

The Chief replied, "When the Forerunner Ecumene was at the height of its power, there existed one other power that could be considered a rival. Humanity."

Garrus asked with disbelief evident in his voice, "How can that be? These Forerunners are no longer here but you guys are. If what you're saying is true anyways."

Miranda explained, "A hundred thousand years ago, ancient humanity possessed a mighty spacefaring empire that controlled many thousands of worlds throughout the Galaxy. They came upon the Forerunner Ecumene and fought against them to escape their foeâ€¦ the Flood. Within decades the Forerunners defeated the ancient Human empire and exiled them to Earth. But the Flood swiftly spread throughout the Galaxy and forced the Forerunners to build the Halo Array, a series of superweapons designed to wipe out all sentient life within twenty-five thousand light-years of one another. To save the other species, including our exiled ancestors, from annihilation, the Forerunners indexed them and brought them to the Arkâ€¦"

Garrus interrupted, "So \_that's\_ where the ancient legends come from. An ancient myth well-known to many of us Turians states that an ancient, god-like race came to us many thousands of years ago and brought our ancestors with them to behold a 'paradise' beyond the stars."

"That must have been them. Your species, like so many others, was indexed and stored in the Ark, which was a colossal extragalactic space construct designed to shelter sentient beings from the lethal effect of the Array."

"How?" Garrus was immensely curious.

"The Ark was simply out of range from the Array's effect." Miranda answered simply.

The Chief interrupted, "I'm sorry to have to cut this short, but we have to move on."

Everyone nodded in response and assembled in a line, and then cautiously walked into the hallway beyond. The narrow hallway was choked with so much debris that everyone had some difficulty in picking a path through the mess, especially the Chief in his MJOLNIR Mk. X armor. As they pushed their way through the messy hallway, they came upon a large room with a wide set of stairs that went underground. A skylight above them allowed a single beam of light to fall upon them, but everything else was shrouded in darkness.

The Chief turned to face the rest of the team and then motioned for his helmet, which indicated night vision mode. Without a word, everyone turned on their own night vision which cast everything in a ghostly grey color. The Chief made his way to the stairs and pointed his rifle down the way. Without saying a word the team started down the stairs into the unknown.

As they were going down the stairs, Alex noticed that the darkness around them seemed to press down upon them as if it were a tangible presence. Even with her night vision on, she began to feel a gnawing fear as the team continued to descend, but her worry eased when her gaze fell upon the Chief a meter ahead of everyone else.

After what seemed to be an eternity of silence, a soft sighing noise emanated up from the impenetrable darkness below them. Alex's breathing quickened with apprehension and even Ramirez began to hesitate with each step. Garrus said dismissively, "Must have been the wind. Might be a cave-in further down there or something." Miranda shrugged in response. They would find out sooner or later.

Eventually they made it to the bottom landing of the stairs, after what seemed to be hours spent walking through the darkness. They looked out upon the large chamber beyond which was choked with mountains of debris and the occasional skeleton. Alex scanned the walls and noticed something that looked like some sort of terminal about five meters away from her position. She announced to everyone, "Hey, I think I uh... found a terminal here."

Everyone rushed to her find and examined it to see if it still drew power from somewhere. Garrus remarked, "The terminal still has power, but it's just a slight trickle. It's barely enough to maintain its stored data." He searched his toolkit and found a capacitor and he remarked, "Huh, I'm surprised I still have this with me. Now it'll come in handy!"

Garrus wired the capacitor to the ancient device and to his delight



the screen began to flicker. Everyone watched in anticipation as the terminal struggled to activate with the small charge from the capacitor, and a few seconds later the screen snapped on and showed an idyllic scene.

The video feed depicted a vibrant, beautiful city that was lit by warm sunlight. The team instantly came to a sobering realizationâ€|  
\_This is the same planet.\_

The video then showed thousands of citizens milling about in their daily lives, and Alex gasped in wonder at the amazing scene. If the previous scene was amazing, this one completely outclassed it. Everyone including the Chief stared at the scene in amazement, as they thought the same thing. \_Those are humans\_...

Suddenly the video changed to show a fleet of unusual looking ships in a line that seemed to be defending the planet, and the video angle panned left to show a massive fleet of ships that were all covered in what could only be described as fleshy growths and appendages. The defending ships all fired brilliant blue beams of light at the enemy and destroyed a portion of their fleet, but the enemy ships simply ignored them and crashed onto the planet's surface.

Everyone watched in horror as the same city that was shown before was quickly overrun by horrible fleshy monsters that overwhelmed and slaughtered the hapless humans that populated the city; and then the terminal suddenly went dead. Garrus checked the capacitor and saw that it still retained a significant charge, and he stated to everyone else, "The capacitor still has a good charge, so that could only mean that this terminal's data is corrupted past this point." The Turian then asked with terror evident in his voice, "What in Spirits' name were those things?!"

Everyone turned to await an answer from the Chief, but he remained silent. Miranda was about to answer the question when the Chief abruptly stated, "Those monsters are called the Flood."

Alex nervously stammered, "Theâ€| the Flood?"

"Yes. Their presence all those years ago could mean only one thing. They may still be here."

Miranda chimed in, "We must be as quiet and stealthy as we possibly can. Maybe we can avoid alerting whatever may be lurking here."

Ramirez interjected, "I thought the Flood were destroyed at the end of the Great War."

The Chief replied flatly, "They were. If any Flood spores remain here, that would mean that this planet was spared from the effects of the Array all those years ago."

As the rest of the team debated with each other about the Flood, Alex had the overwhelming feeling that \_something \_was watching them from the shadows so she turned around and scanned the darkness, but she saw nothing. The sensation returned as soon as she faced the team once again.

The Chief ordered, "Alright, let's move out. If we linger in any one

place, that can raise the chance of us being detected. I want strict COM silence unless it's important, and make double sure your gear is secured. We must be as silent as possible, but don't use your active camouflage unless you need to."

Alex looked around once again, for she still felt that she was being watched by something in the darkness, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. The team moved deeper into the large chamber and came upon a door that was securely locked, and it had black metal plates still covering the large window on it. The Chief tried the door once more and quietly said, "I don't know where this door leads to, but it's locked and covered for a reason. Best not open it."

Everyone acknowledged the order and moved on through the large chamber, but aside from the stairs no other exit could be found except for the blocked door. The Chief stated with a hint of resignation, "Guess this door is the only way out of here besides the way we came in. Cover me while I check it out."

With that, he returned to the door and tried to find a gap in the metal plates that covered the door and with some effort he found one. It was barely two inches in diameter but it allowed a good view of what lay beyond. The Chief quickly scanned the area beyond the door and once he was satisfied that there were no hostiles, he grasped the door and pulled. The creaking sound from the ancient door echoed through the area for a second until the Chief had opened the door by a foot.

A gentle wisp of icy air blew from beyond with a mournful sigh as the Chief squeezed through the gap, which was just wide enough for him to fit. Once he was on the other side he dropped to his knee with his rifle at the ready as if waiting for an ambush, but the place was as silent as a tomb. He noticed that the area they were now in was actually a long hallway that must have gone for at least a mile. Once Alex set foot in the long hallway she immediately felt like there were many eyes watching them from the impenetrable shadows, but even with the night vision in her helmet she could see nothing moving save her own team. Her heart had begun to pound in her chest when she entered the hallway, since she still could not shake the feeling of being watched.

After a quick headcount, the team followed the Chief further into the wide hallway as he picked a path through the debris that cluttered the floor at their feet, being especially careful to avoid kicking anything that would make a noise. As they walked, Alex couldn't help but notice the barely audible sound of hidden footsteps from the shadows behind them, and every time they stopped the footsteps stopped too.

Almost an hour passed until they came to a wide door with brown stains smeared all over the place. The Chief knelt down to examine the stains more closely, and he said with a hint of fear, "This is blood. It almost completely covers this door, so maybe there's something behind it that is important?"

Miranda quickly replied, "Better make your decision quickly, I don't think we're alone here." Everyone grouped together with guns aimed outwards into the darkness, but the entire place was still silent.

Alex thought to herself, \_I'm not going crazy after all. Miranda knows something is out there too\_.

The Chief pulled the door open to reveal a bloodbath that had taken place long ago. There was frozen human and Flood blood all over the place, and charred skeletons littered the ground around them. \_A desperate battle was fought here\_.

The team quietly went through the door and almost fell into a dark abyss that yawned below them. The Chief looked down and then above, and he came to the realization that this tunnel was \_dug \_by something. \_The Flood can dig tunnels\_.

When Miranda and Alex came to the edge of the pit, a barely audible \_moaning\_ noise emanated up from the unfathomable depths. Alex began to visibly shudder in fright and even Miranda seemed unsettled by the soft noise that they had just heard from the pit. Alex timidly whispered, "I just heard something down there."

The Chief instantly went into high alert and pointed his gun down the pit. \_Nothing\_.

The characteristic sound of a door slamming suddenly shattered the silence from the hallway they had just come from. Everyone pointed their guns at the gap in the door. Garrus made a statement that confirmed everyone's suspicions, "We're not alone."

\_We have just awoken something that had lain dormant in the darkness for a hundred thousand years\_.

The voice of Ramirez suddenly shouted, "Contact! Up high!" His silenced rifle whined as he shot at the shadows and the rest of the team fanned out to cover him. Ramirez was the closest one to the door, and based on his wild gunfire he had just seen something that terrified him to the core. The Chief spotted something moving in the shadows and shot at it with the precision that only a peerless marksman could possess. He was rewarded by the wet pulpy \_smack\_ of a body collapsing to the floor.

A distant roar echoed through the ancient ruins and it was soon answered by a series of roars from elsewhere. The Chief yelled, "We're gonna have a \_lot \_of company real soon, so let's get the hell out of here!"

As if a switch had been thrown, the cacophony of roars and moans from the dark hallway suddenly fell silent. Miranda cautioned, "They know we're here and they're waiting for us."

The Chief ordered, "Turn off night vision and use helmet lights instead." Everyone did so and soon the entire area was awash with bright lights. As if a switch had been thrown, a throng of horrible Flood forms ran at full speed towards the team, and everyone opened fire in unison.

Garrus commented with horror, "These things look like humans!"

"They are not human anymore." The Chief replied coldly.

Garrus nodded and fired his Phaeston rifle at a group of combat forms that were about to attack the team. Miranda and Alex both shot

individual combat forms with practiced marksmanship, but the tide of dark horrors continued unabated.

Alex could only watch as one of the horrors \_vaulted \_into the air and landed with a wet thud next to her. The monster raised one of its arms, which possessed wicked, whip-like tentacles that grew out of its wrist, and brought it down upon her.

The Chief had just seen the combat form preparing to strike Alex so he shot at its arm in an effort to blow it off, but as if the fates themselves were conspiring against him the combat form smashed its arm into Alex anyway before finally succumbing to the Chief's gunfire. She flew a meter into the air and went down among the debris. Both Ramirez and Garrus provided covering fire as Miranda ran out and scooped an unconscious Alex into her arms and ran back to the team.

The Chief shouted, "We have to block this door. I have a detpack, but we need at least one more."

Ramirez stepped forward, "I got one, Chief. Just let me know where to put it."

The two soldiers took their places on either side of the door while Garrus covered them, and they took out their C-7 detpacks and stuffed them into the frame of the ancient doorway. Once they were done, they set the timers for ten seconds and ran at full speed back to the rest of the team. The Chief yelled, "FIRE IN THE HOLE!" as everyone ducked around the corner. Miranda grabbed the unconscious Alex and pressed themselves against the wall behind the Chief.

After a moment of hearing only the moans and roars of the Flood forms, the entire place suddenly seemed to jolt and shudder and a blast of fire billowed outward in all directions, causing their shields to flare. The Chief looked around the corner and saw that the corridor they were in had completely collapsed into ruin and thus blocked the doorway with tons of rock. He nodded with satisfaction and turned to join Miranda as she examined Alex.

She explained, "Alex is just unconscious. I haven't seen any signs of suit damage and there's no evidence of blood loss except for some bleeding from her mouth. Her breathing is still even and her heartbeat is strong and steady, so I think her suit's shields spared her from the full force of the blow."

The Chief nodded in relief and then explained to the others, "The doorway is blocked off. It won't stop the Flood, but it'll slow 'em down."

The moans and roars from the Flood army outside soon abated and the team was again left in silence. The Chief said, "We have to press on. Our way out of here is not an option anymore, so we can only go further into the depths of this place." Everyone nodded with agreement to the Chief's assessment of the situation. He added, "I'll carry Alex over my shoulder as we continue, as she is clearly in no condition to fight right now."

Miranda cautioned, "Take it easy Chief, I'm not certain if she has anything broken or not."

"Of course." He stooped to pick up Alex and gently slung her over his shoulder, and he was somewhat surprised at how light she was, even with her suit. This time Garrus took point and Ramirez held the rearguard, as the team continued along the narrow corridor.

After what seemed to be hours walking down the long corridor, they came to a set of stairs that descended into a \_huge\_ bowl-shaped chamber. Everyone went agape at the sheer scale of the massive space before them, which appeared to be at \_least\_ a mile in diameter, if not more. Garrus scanned the area before them for hostiles but the entire place was as silent as a tomb. They noticed a large skylight in the ceiling that admitted a narrow beam of ghostly light which illuminated the floor of the huge chamber, but aside from that, the entire place was shrouded in darkness.

The Chief said, "Let's take a short break here to get our bearings and decide where to go nextâ€|" he trailed off as his gaze fixed upon another terminal ten meters away from him along the wall. Everyone quickly ran toward it and Garrus wired one of his capacitors to the ancient device.

The terminal's display flickered once and finally turned on after a few moments. The grainy video showed a contingent of what seemed to be heavily armed humans clad in full combat armor taking a final stand in the same chamber that the team was in now. Among them were hundreds of civilian men, women, and children all huddled together and their faces were all painted with expressions of terror.

A distant cacophony of roars and bangs echoed through the chamber, which made it seem like a Flood army was trying to get inside. The video skipped forward to show one of the massive metal doors explode as a mass of sickly green pod-like Infection forms issued forth into the chamber along with throngs of savage looking Combat forms. The valiant defenders fired wildly at the \_sea\_ of horrors but they were swiftly overwhelmed by tides of Infection forms and then assimilated.

The team watched in revulsion and shock as the video showed one unfortunate human undergo the horrifying transformation into a Flood Combat form. In response, Garrus could only stammer in shock, "Byâ€| by the Spirits and all things sacred. If these \_things\_ manage to get out, the entire galaxyâ€| the Confederation and the Citadel bothâ€| will fall."

Everyone's attention was focused back on the terminal display as the video showed the most horrifying sight of all. Once all of the human defenders were completely overwhelmed and assimilated into the seething horde, all of them descended upon the terrified civilians and the sounds of bloodcurdling screams filled the chamber.

The video showed one man with his wife and two young girls calmly sitting in a circle and each of them promptly shot themselves once in the head in an effort to deny the horde the use of their bodies. As if that wasn't enough, they watched with terror as an Infection form grabbed hold of the desperate man as he prepared to shoot himself and forcefully shoved a long tendril down his throat.

Suddenly the terminal's display went black and Garrus checked the capacitor once more, "This terminal's video data is corrupt past this point as well." He disconnected the capacitor and stood up, "That

wasâ€| the most horrible thing I've ever seen in my life. It chills my blood to learn that such monsters exist in this galaxy."

The Chief replied, "Fifty years ago, the galaxy literally stood on a knife's edge from falling to the Flood. The Arbiter and I barely managed to stop them on the Ark." His explanation was cut short by a loud \_bang \_that reverberated through the chamber.

Ramirez could only manage to say, "What the hell was that?!"

The Chief ordered, "Lights out and stay quiet, for we might be able to avoid detection this time. Use night vision only." Everyone complied with the order and followed the Chief as he moved along the darkened edge of the chamber.

As they slowly skirted the wall, the loud banging noise suddenly stopped and silence reigned once again. Eventually they came to a metal door that had been forced open as if it were made of paper. The sight of the deformed metal plates amazed everyone, for whatever forced the thick metal doors open like that must have been something massive.

The hallway beyond was caked with old blood and bodies were piled haphazardly everywhere, which gave the impression that a huge desperate battle was fought here as well. The Chief felt motion on his MJOLNIR armor shoulder pauldron, but to his relief it was Alex rousing herself from her unconscious state. He set her down on the ground and supported her as she stood up, since was somewhat unsteady on her feet at first. Her faceplate depolarized to show a stream of blood that had issued forth from her mouth.

Miranda asked with concern, "Are you alright?"

Alex reassured, "Yeaâ€| I think so. That thing just knocked the hell out of me, that's all."

The Chief added, "It's good to have you with us again, Initiate. You really gave us quite the scare back there." Alex gave a nervous chuckle in response.

Garrus roused everyone's attention, "Guys. I think you might want to take a look at thisâ€|"

Everyone followed the Turian's gaze toward a huge black object that occupied the far side of the hallway. Upon further scrutiny, it was revealed that the metal door they had just come in from was the only way in or out of this hallway. The Chief walked up to the object and examined it. The object was made of a strange black metal with strange patterns etched on it, and it had one large hole flanked by five smaller ones in a star pattern. \_A Flood dispersal pod? It doesn't look like any that I've ever seen.\_

The Chief reached out to touch it and as soon as one gloved finger made contact, his mind was wracked by a vision unlike that which he had ever seen before.

\_Endless fleets of ships all bound under one malevolent purpose. Cold and calculating like machines. All united under the control of one being.\_

\_A mighty intergalactic empire fought valiantly against the machines in a desperate war that lasted for tens of thousands of years, but the machines eventually completed their inexorable conquest and claimed final victory. \_

\_As soon as they overthrew the empire's military might, the Machines set about obliterating every last vestige of the empire's people.\_

\_Leaving naught but Dust and Echoes.\_

\_Untold numbers of great civilizations shared in that great empire's grim fate as they were swept aside and annihilated through the eons hence.\_

\_The Citadel and theâ€¦ Crucible? Emphyreans? The Catalyst?\_

A cold mechanical voice spoke in his mind, "\_This is but a taste of the fate that inevitably befalls all organics in their due times. It is as inevitable as the inexorable expansion of the Universe. \_

\_You shall revel in your ignorance for a while longer, but know thisâ€¦ the time for our return is nigh. \_

A cacophony of whispering voices flooded his mind, and one thing that alarmed him was the hypnotically tranquil tone that they possessed as they whispered fell words to him in his mind.

The strange vision ceased as soon as it came leaving his mind reeling with the overload of the surge of information. He knew what the Citadel was, but everything else shown to him in the vision was so strange to him.

Miranda came up behind the Chief, "What happened?"

"I don't know. I sawâ€¦ a vision."

Garrus spoke up, "A vision? What did you see?"

"I sawâ€¦ an empire destroyed by what seemed to be endless fleets of billions of ships in a titanic war by what seemed like \_eons\_ ago."

Miranda's curiosity was now piqued, "The Forerunners being attacked by the Flood?"

"No, the ships seemed to have a life of their own, and I also heardâ€¦ something or someone whispering in my head. It was strange and yet strangely alluring at the same time."

"What did it say?"

The Chief hesitantly stated, "Itâ€¦ said the time of our destruction is drawing nearâ€¦"

Garrus asked, "Anything else?"

"They have also told me that we have awoken something ancient here and that it is now hunting us."

"Yea, the Flood."

The Chief shook his head, "No. It's something \_older\_."

Just as the Chief finished that statement, a deafening \_bang\_ shattered the tomb-like silence.

\_\*\*So ends an epic chapter. I hope you have enjoyed reading it.  
\*\*\_

\_\*\*I wanted to end this with a cliffhanger-style ending so I can sit here and watch you squirm! Muahahahaha!\*\*\_

## 9. Know Your Enemy

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\*

\_\*\*This will be a Citadel-oriented chapter. It will also be somewhat short, as it is kind of an "interlude". \*\*\_

\_\*\*As you read this, don't forget to vote in the poll on my profile. It closes 3 days after the upload date of this chapter.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I originally planned to put the entire STG report in this chapter, but I was "persuaded" not to by a friend. If you want to check out the full report, let me know in your reviews and I'll add it to the ending of the chapter.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Also I hope I've done at least a passable attempt with Mordin's speech patterns.\*\*\_

\_\*\*And with that said, I give you...\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER NINE: KNOW YOUR ENEMY\*\*

\*\*317:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. CITADEL PRESIDIUM.\*\*

Ever since war with the Confederation started, the Special Tasks Group had been working at a feverish pace to try and uncover sensitive information about the new power. Unfortunately their counter-intelligence capabilities were, to put it mildly, very effective. Effective enough to foil the STG.

However the STG agents were able to glean some basic information, such as the history of each member species as well as the political makeup of the Confederation. Information on their technology could not be obtained.

Once this info was obtained by the STG, it filtered down into the hands of some of the premier xenobiologists and xenolinguists in Citadel space.

\* \* \*

><p>The Presidium was abuzz with the usual throngs of politicians mingling with the social elite. However the topic of conversation was about the Confederation.<p>

"\_What is this 'Confederation' and what do they want from us?"\_



"\_Is war truly the right course of action?"\_

"\_Of course it is. This 'Confederation' is just a belligerent upstart faction, whose members need to learn their place."\_

The Council Chambers possessed tight security, as the Citadel \_was\_ at war at this time. However the threat of an attack on the Citadel had gradually become relegated to the metaphorical filing cabinet. The Confederation is not a pack of savages, it \_is\_ a galactic power just like the Citadel.

The C-Sec officers who lined the walls of the Council Chambers looked stoic and unmoving, but they were undoubtedly bored. Like any soldier, they craved action.

The Citadel VIs constantly gave news reports about the war's effect on the Citadel economy.

"\_The war between the Citadel and the Confederation has resulted in a paradigm shift in the Council races' economies, along with those of their more economically adept client races, specifically the Volus."\_

"\_Virtually every Volus-controlled corporation has posted record gains in revenues driven by weapons sales and a myriad of defense contracts. These companies are not alone in their strong economic performance. Several corporations belonging to the Asari and Salarians have also recorded huge gains in weaponry, armor, and bio-amp sales. Various Omni-tool fabrication corporations have reported the highest amount of growth in years."\_

The elevator opened to reveal a Salarian clad in the characteristic white outfit that only a doctor would wear. Around his head were two semi-circular extensions of his outfit whose purpose was only known to him. His face also sported a scar and half of his right horn was missing...

The Salarian doctor dismounted the elevator and walked over toward the benches to await his summons.

A few minutes later a C-Sec officer walked up to the Salarian, "Dr. Mordin Solus?"

Mordin looked up, "Yes?"

"The Council wishes to see you now."

"Of course."

Mordin got up and made his way to the Council dais. He felt eyes staring at him as he walked toward the dais.

Both Councilor Tevos and Councilor Valern were present, however Councilor Sparatus was away inspecting the Turian military groups assembled at the Citadel/Confederation frontier. He was represented by a holographic projection.

Councilor Tevos was the first to speak once Mordin arrived, "Ah, Dr. Solus. It's good to see you've made it."

Mordin fidgeted as he spoke quickly, "Yes. I have a report that may come of interest. Connections with STG, extremely helpful."

Councilor Sparatus spoke with a slightly synthesized tone from the hologram, "We thank you for your diligence with the compilation of the STG analysis report. Please forward your files to our Vis."

"Already done. Files have been completely transferred. Addendum given as well."

Councilor Tevos gave Mordin a puzzled look, "Addendum? From whom?"

Mordin gave a quick smile, "I have compiled an addendum to the STG report. Personal report of Confederation member species. Biology, history, etc. Its contents are rather technical. Richly detailed. Data expands upon that which is given in report."

Without saying any more, each of the Councilors activated their Omni-tools in unison and they began to extract the files of the report.

Councilor Tevos looked up at Mordin, "We shall have a recess for twenty minutes as we read the report."

The Councilors stood up and walked out of the Chambers in a brisk pace, presumably to deliberate amongst themselves in privacy. Councilor Sparatus' holographic projection disappeared.

Mordin bowed and stepped away from the dais, and he returned to his bench to mull over the contents of his report and what the Council would say. Instead, he began to experience a sensation that he did not expect to have, especially at this time. He was tired. Even with the greatly elevated metabolism inherent to his species, all Salarians were still subject to the demands of biology. One of those demands was sleep. He had been feverishly working on and compiling the report for two days nonstop, as he had to process mountains of raw data that was given to him by his STG contacts.

Just as Mordin was beginning to relax in the bench, the same C-Sec officer as before appeared in front of the him, "Doctor? The Council summons you once more."

Mordin instantly became alert, "Of course. Thanks." He got up and rushed for the Council dais. When he arrived, the Councilors were present and eagerly awaiting him. No doubt they had many questions for him.

"Ah, Dr. Solus. We have many questions to ask you." Councilor Tevos consulted her Omni-tool and brought up some of the files of the report, "We understand the mechanics of the Confederation's government and each of their member species' society and history. However the specifics of their biology elude us."

"All specific data included in addendum. Very detailed information."

"I can see that, Doctor," Councilor Valern chuckled, "But the information is rather technical. We need clarification, if you please."

"O... of course, Councilors. I am yours."

Councilor Tevos checked her Omni-tool, "I will display your report on screen, Doctor."

Mordin's addendum was displayed on the large screen on the wall, which drew the attention of everyone within the Chambers.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Addendum: <em>

\_Female body shape and hairstyles reflect instances of evolutionary adaptations due to sexual selection throughout human history. Skin tones also reflect adaptations to different environments on their homeworld, such as ultraviolet radiation exposure. From data obtained via scientific analysis on autopsies of human corpses obtained by STG agents, evidence exists of certain skin pigments that are produced in different levels based on ultraviolet radiation exposure. Therefore, logic suggests that such pigments absorb UV.\_

\_Based on previous data and on known mechanics of scattering of stellar radiation in oxygen-nitrogen atmospheres, it can be inferred that subjects with lighter skin tones had lived on higher latitudes of their homeworld in the past, and that genetic history has made this an inherited trait. Conversely, those with darker skin tones have received higher levels of UV exposure, hence the greater level of pigmentation on such subjects. \_

\_Data obtained by STG agents suggests that insufficient time has passed for humans to be able to 'phase out' such adaptations from their genetic histories.\_

\_One more notable difference is the appearance of red-colored blood in all humans, which is indicative of an iron-based metalloprotein involved in oxygen transport for cellular respiration. Appearance of red blood is a notable anomaly among known species that use oxygen in cellular respiration and metabolism. The anomalous presence of iron-based metalloproteins suggests advantageous levels of energy production, as ionic iron (in this case, present in +2 oxidation state) covalently bonded with amino acid complexes display much greater affinity for oxygen than virtually all other known blood metalloproteins involved in oxygen respiration. \_

\_Such significant usage of iron in humans is indicative of high iron levels within the crustal layer of their homeworld, combined with simple adaptation to their homeworld's highly oxygenated atmosphere. The only other known species that shares these characteristics is the vorcha.\_

\_Dr. Mordin Solus. Final edits to compilation made by STG VI: 'VI-467-MS-028'.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"This is quite the report, Doctor. Your medical knowledge is

quite... astounding." Councilor Sparatus finally spoke, after a moment of stunned silence.<p>

Mordin smiled at the compliment, "My thanks Councilor. I am known throughout STG for my peerless knowledge. Also known for... peculiarities. Eccentricities if you will."

"Of course Doctor. Now..." Councilor Tevos leaned forward in her chair, "What is the behavior of these humans? Are they an aggressive species?"

"Human species possesses varied behaviors. Rather diverse. Sustained countless wars throughout history. Psychiatric analysis states that this species has seen much bloodshed. \_Much \_bloodshed." Mordin looked downcast at that last sentence.

Councilor Sparatus chimed in, "Yes, we have read the STG report on this 'Human-Covenant War'," His holographic figure leaned forward, seeming very intent and engrossed in this information, "I am surprised we know nothing about this war, especially one so massive and brutal."

Mordin looked up, "Humans lost much of population. Many planets destroyed. Covenant bent on annihilation of humans until last year of war."

The Councilors nodded in agreement.

Mordin continued, "Human xenophobic tendencies have been observed. Sangheili allied with humans during war. Earned their trust. Yet humans reluctant to trust other species."

"Even species as peaceful as those of the Citadel?" Councilor Valern asked.

"Humans have received negative first impression. Current war can be interpreted as self-defense. Courtesy of Averis' warmongering behavior."

"That much is obvious. Unfortunately the Confederation is not willing to reach a diplomatic solution with us," Councilor Tevos replied as she processed Mordin's statement, "Is there a possibility of any kind of peace soon?"

Mordin processed the question for a moment and then gave his answer, "Unknown. Prior experience with aliens proven very traumatic and disastrous for humans. Sympathy may prove beneficial for diplomacy."

Councilor Sparatus argued, "That may be. However we cannot allow ourselves to simply give up and cave into the whims of the Confederation..."

"Calm yourself Councilor. We must consider diplomacy before this war boils over into a full-scale crisis." Councilor Tevos interrupted.

Councilor Sparatus snapped with a venomous tone, "How \_dare\_ you order me to keep quiet, Councilor! We are of equal rank and power, in every respect."

"I apologize Councilor. I... we have to maintain order." Councilor Tevos was embarrassed.

As the two Councilors were bickering at each other, Councilor Valern ignored them and said, "If no diplomatic resolution can be reached, then we have no choice but to continue the war." Both of the other Councilors immediately stopped and turned to their Salarian counterpart as he finished his statement.

Their argument already set aside, Councilors Sparatus and Tevos proclaimed in unison, "We concur with this."

Councilor Sparatus' holographic projection sputtered and wavered for a split second. No one currently present within the Chambers noticed, not even the other Councilors and Mordin.

Mordin was about to speak when Councilor Sparatus added, "What are their... weaknesses?"

The Salarian doctor was surprised at the Councilor's question.

"The humans. They must have some type of weakness."

Councilor Tevos looked over at Sparatus' holographic projection in shock, "What are you saying, Councilor?"

"Your addendum states they have iron-based blood proteins. What can we use against them?"

Mordin was shocked at the Councilor's question as well, "I... I... Why are you asking?"

"Answer the question." Councilor Sparatus' voice became very threatening and cold, even with the synthesized tone of the holographic projector.

"Unbound cyanide groups impede oxygen respiration. Cyanide may have more pronounced effect on humans, due to higher oxygen demand. Such is the product of evolution."

Councilor Tevos was aghast at her fellow Councilor's behavior, "Councilor! Are you daring to suggest we sanction chemical and/or biological attacks against this species? You know our treaties regarding the ban of weapons of mass destruction!"

"War demands sacrifices." Councilor Sparatus said coldly before his hologram suddenly vanished.

Councilor Tevos was angry now, "Doctor. You should have kept silent. Councilor Sparatus was \_out of line \_with those questions."

"Apologies Councilor, I did not realize intent. Regarding cyanide poisoning, there are many compounds that counteract the effect. Specifically chelating agents."

"What do you mean?"

"Chelating agents are certain metallic compounds. Their purpose is to

bind to non-metal organic molecules. Such compounds would be selected based on biological activity. Once bound, the compounds are quickly excreted. In this case, cyanide molecules would be bound to chelating agents and rendered harmless."

Councilor Valern turned to his Asari counterpart, "Do you think Councilor Sparatus would try any of the things he had said?"

"I don't know. His behavior was very... unusual." She turned to Mordin, "We must prevent these attacks from ever happening. If they do... I can't even begin to contemplate the consequences..."

Mordin nodded in agreement and replied, "I will use STG contacts to help. Must alert Confederation."

"I agree," Councilor Tevos said as both Councilors stood up, "As of now, this Council is adjourned."

Mordin bowed and walked away from the dais. His passive expression concealed a storm of emotions and ideas raging within his expansive mind. He had inadvertently given Councilor Sparatus the means to wreak untold havoc against the humans. \_He had to stop him... somehow.\_

He lifted his Omni-tool to his mouth and spoke into the communicator module, "Solus to STG contact Z1X. Commence stockpile of chelating agents for cyanide poisoning. Effective immediately."

"Yes, Doctor. Have you any more requests to make of us?" A whispered voice replied over the COM.

"Need a fast ship. Must be ready at STG dock 317 in ten minutes. Also have human language translation software available."

"Will do, Z1X out."

Mordin rushed for the elevator to the Presidium ground floor. \_I must go to Confederation space. Must warn them before it is too late. What have I done?\_

**\*\*317:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. UNKNOWN SYSTEM.\*\***

In cold interplanetary space, within an isolated system on the fringe of the Milky Way, floated a lone black shape. This particular 'shape' loosely resembled a massive squid or some other sea animal. This sector of space was well outside Citadel territory, well outside any territory for that matter. Even the Quarian Migrant Fleet had never been here.

The dead system consisted of a dim neutron star that was orbited by two heavily irradiated planets. How they had survived their parent star's supernova was unknown, but it was also possible that they were captured by the neutron star's gravity.

One such planet possessed an ancient artifact of terrible power...

\* \* \*

><p>Saren sat, deep in thought, on his 'throne'. He was told by the Machines just a few days ago that the Conductor resided in an ancient

installation deep within the planet. <em>No doubt such an installation would possess extensive security systems. If they are still active, that is.<em>

Benezia appeared behind Saren, cleared her throat, and stated, "The planet in question is bathed by deadly levels of radiation from this pulsar. The radiation carries enough energy to penetrate more than two kilometers into its crust."

"It matters not." Saren said simply. His eyes remained closed.

"Well, how could anyone have lived on this planet?" Benezia actually anticipated Saren's answer as soon as she asked that question.

Saren adjusted himself in the chair, "The installation is buried deep within the planet, more than twenty kilometers into the crust."

Benezia grunted in agreement. It only seemed logical, after all. But somehow, getting down there, grabbing the Conductor, and sailing off into the irradiated sunset would be too easy. She sensed that \_something \_was awaiting them.

Saren looked to his right and beckoned for Benezia. She momentarily hesitated as she strove to resist his influence, but Saren's iron will was absolute.

Benezia came over to Saren's side. He began, "The three of us will go into this installation and retrieve the Conductor." Suddenly Saren's voice took on a venomous tone, "And don't ever hesitate like that again. You should consider yourself fortunate that you still have some semblance of control."

"Yes, master." Benezia bowed.

"Do not tempt me again. I have yet to test the Dragon's Teeth myself, and you would not want to be the first test subject."

Benezia said nothing more and promptly left Saren's sanctum.

\*\*318:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. CITADEL SECURITY CYBERSECURITY DIVISION HQ.\*\*

Life in the C-Sec Cybersec Division was a constant bore. The overwhelming majority of cybercrime incidents were actually committed by one civilian hacking into some extranet site or someone else's Omni-tool. Such things were child's play to track and neutralize.

The officer in charge, a Turian named Captain Vorynus did little else but count down the days until his retirement.

However, today would not be a typical day.

\* \* \*

><p>"Sir. We've received an anonymous tip from an undisclosed source. You will want to see this!" a Salarian C-Sec officer excitedly

yelled.<p>

Captain Vorynus waved the young officer over and asked, with sarcasm evident in his voice, "What now? Someone hacking the banks again?"

"No sir," the officer accessed his Omni-tool and transferred the information into the C-Sec Cybersec database, "See for yourself."

Vorynus waved his subordinate out and checked his Omni-tool. Indeed there was a new report marked 'URGENT â€" EYES ONLY' on its COM inbox. He opened the message and began reading...

\* \* \*

><p>-<em>URGENT â€" SECURITY LEVEL Z-<em>

\_TO CITADEL SECURITY, CYBERSEC DIVISION.\_

\_We feel compelled to report to you that a third party 'may' have committed an intrusion into the secured COM link between Councilor Sparatus' physical location and the Council Chambers.\_

\_Our source cannot be mentioned, as it is... very sensitive. However, the information is extremely reliable. \_

\_In order to discover the backdoor routine, you must serve a warrant to the Presidium Communications Director for the secured Council Chamber COM logs, in which you'll uncover the backdoor rather easily, if your investigative skills are up to the task.\_

\_Regards,\_

\_S\_

\* \* \*

><p>Captain Vorynus sat back in his chair, stunned at the information this tip revealed. <em>Someone hacking the Council's secured COM links? If I can pull this off, I'm looking at an early retirement to the Presidium suites!<em>

Vorynus filed a request for a search warrant with the C-Sec brass and quickly walked out of his office. He promptly made his way for the Cybersec forensic mainframe. He had a lot of work to do...

\*\*318:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM, PRESIDIUM COUNCIL CHAMBERS.\*\*

Councilor Sparatus' outburst at Dr. Mordin Solus was noted by the rest of the Councilors, but they had also suppressed any mention of it on the extranet news sites. The Councilor's behavior was highly unusual and rather disturbing during that meeting the day before. Something was at work, even here among the Councilors.

"Councilor Sparatus' behavior was disconcerting yesterday." Councilor Valern said to his Asari counterpart.



"It was. Would it be possible for someone to be tampering with the COM link?"

Councilor Valern chuckled in disbelief, "That is impossible Councilor. The Council COM link is the most secure channel in Citadel space. It is secure enough that even the STG would have great difficulty cracking it!"

Councilor Tevos' Omni-tool flashed twice, indicating an incoming message. She opened it and gasped in surprise at its contents. Councilor Valern did the same once he read the message on his own Omni-tool. It was a warrant for a search of the Presidium Communications mainframe, specifically for all of the communications logs regarding Councilor Sparatus' holographic COM link.

The unthinkable had happened.

"The Council COM link was hacked? Impossible." Councilor Valern was determined that the tip's authenticity was questionable, at best, "Someone is playing games with us. If this was the Confederation's doing..."

"It's not impossible. Councilor Sparatus may be obstinate at times, but never would he even dare to suggest sanctioning a \_terror \_attack against anyone. Not even an enemy. I believe the tip is authentic and we must grant the warrant."

"Fine." Councilor Valern conceded.

**\*\*UNKNOWN DATE. UNKNOWN LOCATION.\*\***

\_Our plans are in place. Slowly, yet inexorably, are they coming to fruition. Soon it shall be time for the return. Soon the galaxy shall burn and all within it shall know death unending.\_

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>I hope you've enjoyed this chapter. It kind of sets things up, no? The more astute readers among you may have already figured out the identity of the hacker or the source of that fortuitously timed tip.<strong>\_

\_\*\*The next chapter will see a return to the Dead Planet that the Chief and co. are on. And don't worry about chapter lengths, the next one will be much longer. \*\*\_

\_\*\*I'm in the process of rewriting some of the earlier chapters as well, and that combined with work on Chapter 10 will require some extra time. Chapter 10 will probably be up before the rewriting process of the earlier chapters is complete.\*\*\_

## 10. Horrors In The Dark

**\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\***

\_\*\*As the outcome of the poll was inconclusive, I have decided that the title will remain unchanged. Thanks for voting though.\*\*\_

\_\*\*For the time being, the Chief will be called as such or

occasionally by 'The Spartan'. Later on I may begin to use his actual name. Let me know your opinions via reviews or private messages.\*\*\_

\_\*\*One person sent me a PM a while back that stated their dissatisfaction with the team using relatively weak weapons, especially the Chief. The reasoning behind it is to attempt to convey the danger and fear that they would all feel regarding the Flood infestation of the Dead Planet. Also they did not count on anything being alive there either :)\*\*\_

\_\*\*But don't worry, the team will find some surprises soon. And about the Flood... they are not the only things that lurk in the dark. You'll see.\*\*\_

\_\*\*And finally, I must stress that the Chief is NOT indoctrinated. He simply experienced the same kind of vision as Shepard did when he/she activated the Prothean Beacon in ME1. However the Chief's vision was more "interactive".\*\*\_

\_\*\*With all that said, on with the chapter!\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER TEN: HORRORS IN THE DARK\*\*

\*\*DECEMBER 22, 2609. SYSTEM 82420, PLANET THREE.\*\*

The Chief's brain reeled from the mental onslaught given by the vision he had just experienced. His mind was filled with a multitude of questions. \_Just who are these 'Empyreans'? What is the 'Crucible'? The 'Catalyst'? \_He had no idea.

Miranda walked up to the Spartan, "Hey Chief, are you OK?" She asked.

"Yes," he shook his head to clear his mind of the turbulent thoughts, "Any word on a way out of here?"

Just as he asked that, Ramirez ran up to the group, panting for breath, "I found something you guys will want to see. Follow me." Everyone looked at him in amazement and quickly followed him to the source of his excitement. Behind the huge black dispersal pod in the center of the large chamber was yet \_another \_terminal.

"My capacitors are actually running out of juice. Need to find a way to charge 'em up soon," Garrus said as he connected the tiny device to the ancient terminal's exposed wiring. "Got it."

The ancient device's cracked display flickered for a full minute until a grainy video began to play on it. Everyone crowded around the small display and watched with rapt attention.

\_Just as the Flood had overrun and consumed the last remaining humans on the planet, the surviving ships turned, in unison, toward the planet's sun. The largest ship, more than ten kilometers in length, released a large glowing sphere of blue-black energy that seemed to distort space around it. The other ships followed suit. \_

\_As soon as the ships fired their orbs of energy toward the Sun-like star, they remained still. It was almost as if they were preparing to embrace whatever fate awaited them.\_

\_Some time passed with nothing happening, but then the star suddenly flashed white. The brilliance of the star's sudden outburst of light obscured everything and bathed the planet with blinding light. Just before the planet was completely obscured by the impossibly brilliant light, the video showed bright aurorae flickering and dancing all around the planet.\_

\_The video skipped forward one week. The sight that it now revealed was shocking. Not a trace remained of the ships that had defended the planet. The human planet itself looked like hell had been unleashed upon it. Massive fires raged amongst the cities and most of the atmosphere was literally stripped from the planet, as it had made a trail behind the planet which starkly resembled a giant comet. Whatever the ancient humans have done here, it had devastated the planet. Much more so than a mere glassing from orbit.\_

\_The video skipped forward once more, this time the timestamp seemed to indicate that it was now one year after the incident. The fires that raged on the planet had been extinguished long ago, presumably due to the loss of most of the atmosphere. A filtered close-up view of the star appeared next, and its surface seemed to convulse and rage like some hellish inferno. Whatever the ancients did here, it had also destabilized the star. \_

\_The power of their weaponry seemed to be beyond anything that they had imagined.\_

\_The video suddenly went black.\_

Everyone was left speechless as the terminal's display went black.

"That... was incredible," Garrus finally stammered out, "I... I can't believe what I just saw."

Both Alex and Ramirez snapped out of their stupor and simply nodded in agreement. The Chief simply turned around to face the massive doorway that led out into the cavernous chamber beyond.

As Garrus was disconnecting the capacitor from the ancient terminal, Miranda knelt down to study it. She wondered why each of the terminals they found and viewed had shown their videos in sequence. However, her examination of the terminal's decaying electronic components yielded no answers.

Just as Garrus had finished disconnecting his capacitor from the terminal, Ramirez noticed him and asked, "Do you bring those things everywhere you go, or something?"

"Not usually. However I felt that this particular mission would make them valuable to us," then Garrus gave a smug look, "And as you can see, I was right."

While everyone was mulling over what they had seen, the Chief walked around the room checking for any hidden hostiles or clues. He knew they would never be able to return to the surface the way they came, for an army of Flood was that way. \_There has to be another way. \_As the Chief looked around behind the large black pod in the room, he noticed an indentation on the wall. Upon further investigation, he

noticed that the indentation actually continued along the wall as a narrow line until it made a square that was about two meters in height. In the center of the square, there was one symbol that seemed oddly familiar. It vaguely resembled one of the Forerunner symbols, but it was... different. He extended his hand toward it...

The Chief recoiled in surprise when the symbol lit up with a dim blue light. A soft grinding noise emanated from within the wall as the square lit up with the same blue light. Soon the entire room was dimly lit by the blue light from the lines along the wall.

Everyone noticed the change and began to murmur amongst themselves. Garrus in particular was amazed, "By the Spirits... Do my eyes deceive me?"

"No they don't. This is amazing!" exclaimed Alex, who had never seen any of this kind of thing before.

The Chief rushed up to them in a full sprint, "I have found a way out of here. Hurry." Everyone followed him over to where the lit square had been, except it was now missing entirely. In its place was an opened doorway that led into the dark unknown that lay beyond. The Chief promptly went into the narrow passage, but everyone else initially hesitated.

All of a sudden, a deafening \_CRASH\_ shattered the silence. The Flood were close at hand.

As if some unseen force had cracked a whip, everyone ran into the dark passageway. They went through just in time, as they all heard another deafening \_CRASH\_ sound from the massive chamber outside. Alex looked back around her shoulder to see a stone slab fall into place behind them, thus sealing them in this passage.

The Chief whispered solemnly, "Now we have no choice but to continue on into the unknown darkness," he motioned for his helmet, "Night vision on. We go full stealth from here on out. No active camo unless it's an emergency." On his helmet HUD three acknowledgment lights winked green along with a hand signal from Garrus, who was directly behind the Chief.

In the claustrophobic passageway that led into the dark unknown, the team crept along slowly like mice trying to avoid a hungry cat on the hunt. The Chief had point with Garrus behind him, and Miranda and Alex remained in the middle with Ramirez guarding their six. Undoubtedly the Flood now owned the chamber they were just in, but they had a chance to give them the slip if they remained silent. The cacophony of moans and muffled screams gradually faded away as they continued along the seemingly endless passage.

After what seemed like hours spent stumbling about in the darkness, they came to a dead end. Alex huffed in frustration and Miranda voiced her own, "A dead end? You've got to be kidding me." She was careful to keep her voice as a whisper.

The Chief noticed the indentation of the same symbol as before, so he put his hand on it. Unsurprisingly it lit up and formed a square around his hand. The stone slab quietly slid upwards to reveal yet another hallway, just as dark as the narrow passage they had just come out of.

"How did you do that?" Ramirez asked. The Chief simply shrugged in response.

Unlike the previous chambers they had been in, this hallway was spotless. Not a single trace of any battle or the Flood could be seen. It was as if this place had never been touched by the horrors of the past.

Alex gasped in wonder at the immaculate hall, which seemed to extend for miles. She could only manage to say, "This is... magnificent."

"It is as if this place was frozen in time," Garrus replied as he stepped forward, "No bodies, no blood, nothing. Apart from the darkness, you would think this place was still occupied."

"There's no way anyone still lives here... except for the Flood." Miranda stated plainly.

Soon, they would discover that they were not alone in the seemingly empty halls...

"Let's move on. We should not linger in any one place." The Chief said as he began to walk away from the team. Even though he kept it hidden from everyone else, he had been deeply affected by the vision caused by contact with the mysterious black dispersal pod they had found earlier. The Flood he could handle, but the words seared into his mind from the vision gave him pause. \_Something older and more terrible than the Flood... That possibility chilled the Spartan to the bone. He could hardly think of something being \_worse \_than the Flood.

Everyone quickly assembled into a line behind the Chief and followed him as he walked through the darkness, with a slow deliberate pace. As they continued on, the darkness seemed to press around them as if it possessed some malevolent will of its own. Not a sound, besides their own footsteps, could be heard in the ancient hall. Even though no one showed it, they were doubtlessly anxious as they walked in the silent dark.

After what seemed like days walking through the darkness aided with naught but the grey washed-out vision given by the enhanced vision in their helmets, they came to a great metal door that appeared to be more than ten meters high and five meters wide.

The Chief looked up and noticed a multitude of mysterious glyphs inscribed all over the huge door. They looked much different than any of the glyphs they had found earlier, but yet they seemed strangely familiar... Suddenly Alex stepped forward and laid her hand upon the spotless metal surface. Whatever the door was made of, it must be some extremely tough and corrosion-resistant metal to have lasted all these years. However, nothing happened when Alex laid her hand upon the door.

"No power, perhaps?" Garrus surmised.

The Chief scanned their surroundings for some terminal or switch that would open the door. There was nothing. It was either go through the massive metal door or go back. He knew that the hallway also extended

in the opposite direction for a long distance from where they had entered.

"I cannot see any mechanism that would get this door opened." The Chief said as he stepped away from the door, "We need to go back. This hall also continues past the point where we entered, in the opposite direction. Let's move out."

Everyone groaned in response. They had stumbled about in the dark for what seemed an eternity only to hit a dead end. However, everyone knew there was no choice but to go back down the hall to find the other end. Maybe there was something down there that would be able to open the door here... They would find out one way or another.

They left the giant metal door behind and walked back down the hall. Hours passed until they got to the point they entered from. The stone slab had fallen into place, but the Chief could still make out the square indentation in the wall.

The team stopped for a moment to take a breather. They had been on the move almost nonstop for the last three hours, ever since leaving the chamber with the terminal. A minute later, they were on the move once more. As they continued along the ancient hall, they noticed small piles of debris all over the place, and the more they walked the more debris piles they would see. They also saw the frozen body of an ancient human lying there amongst the piles of debris. It was well-preserved by the extreme cold, considering the extreme age of this place. The temperature was around -70C and the atmospheric pressure was just a small fraction of Earth Standard.

As they stood there examining the body at a distance, a soft grinding noise echoed from the hall ahead of them. Everyone whipped around to face the direction that the sound came from, expecting a seething horde of Flood to come at them. But there was nothing.

Alex began to shrink back behind the Chief in dread. He could understand her fear, as the young woman had never seen or even imagined anything like this before in her life. Not to mention that she was nearly lost to the vile horrors only hours ago. There was no doubt that the memory of that would be etched into her mind for life.

They stood still with guns aimed down the hall for almost five minutes, but silence now reigned in the dark. There was nothing.

"That was weird," Ramirez said as he lowered his MA-59 rifle, "I suppose we'll find out what made that noise soon."

Everyone relaxed and continued on down the hall, but they still kept their guns raised. The anxiety they all felt was almost palpable in the rarefied, frigid air.

Eventually they made it to a 'T' intersection, and all remained quiet. The Chief held up his hand, signaling everyone to stop at the corner. He peeked around the corner down the hall to the left, but he noticed that there was a cave-in which had completely sealed off that passage. The right hall was the only way to go, so they pressed on that way. As they walked, they began to have a foreboding feeling that something was lying in wait for them.

Eventually they made it to a large metal door that had been broken down and pushed aside. Whatever it was that broke down the thick metal door, it must have been truly terrifying to behold for the ancient humans that defended this place. The signs of battle were obvious. Frozen bodies, both Flood and human, were scattered all over the place. The area around the broken door was caked with frozen blood and there were scorch marks all over. "Stay alert." The Chief ordered. Everyone instantly had guns held up and aimed outward. No sound was heard, save for their deliberate footsteps and barely audible heartbeats...

All of a sudden, the sound of some heavy object hitting the stone floor shattered the silence. It was followed by a barely audible \_slithering \_sound. Even though no one noticed, the Chief's face went pale. He knew of only one thing that would make that sound...

"What was that?" Alex asked, with dread evident in her voice.

"Use active camo now!" The Chief hissed in the COM. Ramirez, Alex, and Miranda quickly disappeared from view. Garrus and the Chief ducked behind a large pile of debris. They held their breaths and remained still. The Chief dared to look further down the dark chamber, and he saw a sight that he dreaded more than any other...

A \_sea \_of Flood Infection forms skittering toward them...

If they remained quiet, there was a chance that the beach ball-sized horrors would never notice them and simply go out into the hall the team had just come from. However, the Chief also had another plan in store for them. He waited until the last Infection form passed into the hallway that the team had just come from.

"Let's give them some surprises of our own," he hissed into the COM, "I want overlapping fields of fire and grenades down the hall."

As if someone had cracked a whip, everyone immediately poured a deadly fusillade of hypersonic slugs upon the squirming mass of Infection forms. Both Ramirez and the Chief lobbed grenades at them, which popped hundreds, at least, with each blast. Alex and Miranda fired at individual Infection forms with excellent marksmanship. Miranda was an experienced marksman, but Alex had very little experience apart from her standard two month UNSCINTA training. Nevertheless, Alex held her own.

Garrus was like a machine, his Phaeston assault rifle making short work of a good portion of the seething horde. Occasionally he would switch to his Krysaë sniper rifle and pop many pods in a line with practiced ease.

Even with the withering fields of fire they were pouring on the fragile Infection forms, there were a \_lot \_of them and the team lacked heavy weapons. The Chief inwardly cursed at himself for only bringing a BR55. However none of them had known beforehand that this planet would be \_crawling \_with Flood. With each popped Infection form, two more seemed to take its place. The team was beginning to burn through their ammo stocks.

And then as suddenly as they had come the onslaught of Infection Forms suddenly ceased, as if someone had thrown a switch.

"I wish we would have brought more gear..." Ramirez finally said. That comment rang true with everyone.

The Chief nodded in agreement, and after shouldering his weapon he replied, "Yea, we didn't have the best intel going in. Let's just hope we come across some type of weapons cache down here."

Their conversation was cut short by a loud banging noise that reverberated around the ancient chamber. The sound repeated itself three times until all became quiet again.

"What the HELL was that?" Ramirez asked. The Chief checked the team vitals on his HUD, and noticed that Alex's heart rate was spiking into tachycardic levels and she was hyperventilating. She was absolutely terrified.

"Alex, try to relax," the Chief cautioned, "You're burning through your O2." Alex simply nodded in response.

Even though the AIS suits possessed gas exchange devices and CO2 scrubbers, breathing very rapidly for a sustained period of time would overwhelm their recycling capability and exhaust oxygen levels in the suit, potentially leading to hypoxia.

Another bang was heard, but this time it sounded like it was muffled and dampened. Everyone sensed that they would encounter whatever made those noises soon enough. For now though, they had to press on.

"Are you alright?" Garrus asked Alex. The Chief noticed the turian's display of genuine concern for the young initiate.

"Yea, I'll be OK," Alex replied, her voice still shaking from fear, "I'll be OK..."

Once Alex had gotten her panic under control, the team moved on.

As they moved through the ancient chamber, silence reigned once more. Whatever made those loud sounds had either moved on or was lying in wait for the team. Eventually they arrived in another great chamber. What was different about this chamber was that the floor fell away into a seemingly bottomless pit. On the other side of the huge chamber was another door.

However, they would have to cross the three hundred meter-wide expanse of emptiness that lay before them...

"How are we supposed to cross \_that\_?" Garrus asked incredulously.

The Chief remembered the hard light bridges that were a common feature of Forerunner installations. Perhaps there was one here that was still functional. He looked around the chamber for a moment until he found a narrow path that led up to a catwalk above them. \_That had to be where a switch would be.\_

"Wait here, I'll be back." The Chief said as he swiftly marched to the path that led up to the catwalk. Everyone hid behind the huge piles of debris that were scattered all about this side of the chamber.



The Spartan was now alone in the darkness. The only source of light here was a skylight that opened to the outside. Even then, the chamber was only slightly \_less \_dark than the one before. The Chief had the overwhelming sensation of something lurking around the corner. He peeked around the corner of the path, fully expecting an army of Flood waiting for him. But there was nothing... The area he was in was so silent that his helmet's aural amplifiers could literally pick up the breaths from his teammates. Nevertheless, he walked with a very slow and deliberate pace with his rifle at the ready. Ready for whatever might lay in ambush.

He made it to the catwalk without incident. The stone catwalk seemed \_much \_higher from the floor below than it was when they had first entered the chamber. The Chief looked down the catwalk and saw a small podium about a hundred meters ahead. He jogged towards it and swept the surrounding area once more, to make sure there were no surprises. \_The Flood could lurk anywhere. \_

The Chief examined the podium and noticed a familiar-looking symbol emblazoned upon the black metal. Without a second thought, he found himself laying a gloved hand upon the symbol...

\_SCREECH\_

A horrible screeching noise echoed about the chamber as the ancient machinery seemed to come back to life. Two rails extended out over the bottomless pit and stopped with only ten meters of space separating them. A 'ripping' noise then reverberated around the room when the rails appeared to emit a flickering light. Within a few moments, the light grew in intensity and soon it had encompassed both rails. The light then widened to form a 'span' over the pit below.

Silence descended upon the chamber once more when the machinery stopped and the light remained static and unchanging. The Chief was amazed that the ancient device \_still worked, \_ even after all of the years that had passed and all the damage this place had seen.

He swiftly moved to rejoin the team below.

\* \* \*

><p>Garrus was amazed at the bridge that seemed to be made of nothing but light. Without any hesitation, he ran toward the pit and gingerly touched the light bridge with one finger. To his surprise, it felt as unyielding as the stone floor he stood on. <em>Amazing, simply amazing.<em>

Soon everyone joined him at the bridge, and they all shared in his amazement. "This, as you can see, is a bridge made of hard light." The Chief stated as he joined the team.

"What's hard light?" Garrus asked, highly intrigued. The highly advanced technology that these ancient humans had possessed seemed almost fantastical to him. Almost unreal.

"I'll explain it later," The Chief replied as he did a quick headcount of the team, "Let's get across first."

Everyone tested the light bridge by tentatively tapping it with their feet. The only reaction was a tiny ripple. They nervously watched as the Chief was the first to walk out onto the bridge. He jogged across and stopped at the other side. He waved for the others to join him, and they did so after some hesitation.

Both Alex and Garrus were the last to cross the light bridge, fortunately they had made it across without incident.

They scanned their surroundings for a moment and once they were satisfied it was clear, they walked over to the large metal door they saw when they had entered this great chamber. Unlike the massive metal door they encountered several hours ago, this metal door possessed a terminal next to it. The Chief walked over to it and pressed his hand into the metal indentation on the terminal. A hand-shaped symbol lit up in response and the grinding sound of ancient machinery was heard. The metal door slid to the left. A blast of air blew around the team and into the passage beyond.

"One sec, Chief. What is this 'hard light' you mentioned?" Garrus insisted.

The Chief turned around and faced the Turian, "Hard light is exactly as the words describe. It's coherent light that actually becomes solid enough to walk on. Solid enough to drive tanks across..."

"How does that work?"

"I don't know exactly. I'm not an expert in that kind of field, by any means," the Chief folded his arms, "All I'm concerned about is that it works."

Garrus nodded, satisfied with the answer for now.

The team fell silent and moved on through the doorway. The passage beyond was even darker than the hallway and the chambers they had been in ever since leaving that room with the huge black Flood dispersal pod. As soon as Alex followed her teammates into the passage, she immediately noticed a presence here. A foreboding and evil presence. The passageway looked like it hadn't been touched ever since the fall of this colony over a hundred thousand years ago. Dust covered everything, and with each step, this dust was disturbed. It quickly formed a cloud that lingered about them and partially obscured their night vision.

Eventually it got so thick that the Chief was forced to give the signal to use helmet lights. Once they were turned on, the light from their helmet lamps cut through the dust. However, the element of stealth was now gone.

After an hour of slowly walking down the passageway, they noticed that the floor next to the walls dropped away into nothing. Apparently even this place was not spared from the effects of battle. However, upon closer examination, the Chief noticed that the holes in the floor looked like they had been dug by something. The Flood? No. No sign of the Flood here.\_

They left the pits behind and continued along the hall. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary until they got to another intersection. As soon as Alex looked down the left passage, she gasped in fright. The

Chief noticed her reaction and pointed his gun down the way.  
\_Nothing.\_

"What did you see?"The Chief asked her.

Alex wrung her hands and her eyes darted from side to side. She eventually stammered out, "I... I saw something," she pointed down the dark passage, "It looked right at me and then disappeared."

Before she had finished her sentence, both the Chief and Garrus ran down the hallway and checked it out. After a few minutes they returned.

"There's nothing down there," the Spartan told the frightened initiate, "Just a bunch of holes."

"No sign of the Flood either." Garrus added.

As soon as Garrus finished that statement, a horrible roar broke the silence. Everyone whipped around with guns trained on the hallway that the Chief and Garrus had checked out. \_That roar was not from the Flood. It was something else...\_

That single loud roar was joined by many others. They also sounded slightly mechanical. \_Definitely not the Flood.\_

"What the \*\*HELL \*\*was that?" Ramirez bellowed out.

As if to answer his question, a throng of horrible blue humanoid creatures ran at full clip toward the team. What was particularly strange about them was that they each glowed blue.

"\*\*OPEN FIRE!" \*\*The Chief bellowed. Instantly everyone opened up.

Even though their withering fire began to cut down swathes of these horrible creatures, they began to get ever closer to the team with each wave. One ran up to Miranda as if it were possessed by a demon. It smashed its arm into her back and unloaded an electrical pulse onto her AIS armor; and she yelled out in pain. Garrus put it down with an expertly placed burst of gunfire. She nodded at Garrus in gratitude.

"My shields are out," Miranda reported as she shot at a trio of the strange creatures that were about to attack Alex.

The Chief checked Miranda's AIS functions, and what she said was true. These creatures had shorted out her shields. Whatever these things were, they were synthetic. However, they were made to resemble some perverted mockery of organic life. What was particularly unsettling was that these things vaguely looked like \_humans\_. \_What the hell is going on here\_?

As they were laying down fire upon the glowing blue monstrosities, the Chief noticed that the magazines for his BR55 rifle were gone. \_No ammo\_. He took out his sidearm and shot at the horrors with practiced ease. Whatever they were, a single headshot was enough to put them down.

As the onslaught continued, the team noticed that a few of the new arrivals were actually red. Garrus shot at one with his sniper rifle and he was rewarded with an explosion. The red creature's explosive demise had cut down four of its companions and disabled several others. "Don't let those things get near us. Concentrate fire on them." The Chief ordered.

Eventually the horrible onslaught abated and then ceased as quickly as it had begun. Smoke filled the hallway and the surroundings were lit by several small fires.

The Chief surveyed the damage and demanded, "Status report!"

"We're OK. Miranda got the wind knocked out of her though." Ramirez replied.

The Chief checked Miranda's vitals. She was fine but the impact of the creature's arm would result in a bruise on her back. Her suit's shields were sluggishly recharging though. The electrical shock her suit had taken triggered the EMP failsafes in it, which would put her shielding systems in a reduced functionality state for an hour. Until they were back to 100%, she would be vulnerable to further attack. Fortunately her active camouflage systems remained unaffected.

The squad had faced down one of the most horrifying sights anyone could behold, and yet they had emerged alive. For that they were thankful.

Little did they know that that attack was but a taste of the dread horrors they would experience here. Here on this dead, god-forsaken planet...

The team warily continued on into the hall where the tidal wave of dark horrors had swarmed from. The hall was a mess. Debris was scattered all over the place and frozen bodies were piled haphazardly among them. Scorch marks had literally painted the walls black. Whoever held the defense here had fought like hell until they were overwhelmed. Perhaps it was these things they had fought?

The squad wandered about the ancient battleground, investigating the piles of debris that were dispersed all over the place. Eventually they noticed four tall spike-like objects standing straight up. Each one had an array of cables and wires leading to some unseen place. The spikes themselves were a half meter wide at their base, but they tapered to a wickedly sharp point at the top, over three meters high. They could only guess what their purpose was...

They left the wicked spikes behind and continued on down the hallway, but they came upon what may have been an elevator in the past. Dim sunlight illuminated the floor at the base of the shaft, but all around it the darkness was thick. So thick.

With no choice but to backtrack to the intersection, the squad left the chamber of horrors behind. Eventually they got to the intersection and continued straight ahead. They noticed that the hallway they were now in was devoid of any debris, save for layers of ancient dust that had caked everything around them.

Eventually they arrived at another great metal door. The Chief walked over to the terminal and placed his hand in the indentation. The

usual grinding noise of the machinery was heard as the metal door slid open to the right. Beyond it was a circular chamber with a large dais in the center. Upon it, there was a column that appeared to be made of cables encased in some type of translucent material. The large room was absolutely spotless and not a sign of damage could be seen. Not a single body could be found either. They surmised that the door had been sealed for all these years, and perhaps it was even defended to the last by the ancient humans here.

Everyone walked up the dais and stopped at the column. The Chief reached forward with his hand until it met resistance. It was a hard light control panel. He laid his hand upon it and to his surprise, everything in the room lit up. The hard light panel showed a ghostly array of illegible glyphs that resembled the ones all over the walls in the previous halls and on the enormous metal door that had stopped them prior.

A chair-sized object next to the Chief suddenly lit up and showed the unmistakable holographic avatar of an AI. Its avatar resembled a tall, muscular human who sported long black hair and white face markings. \_Presumably tattoos.\_

The ancient AI spoke in an unintelligible language for a moment, and then its avatar turned white. Suddenly it spoke perfect English.

"Who is it that intrudes upon my slumber?" it said.

Everyone exchanged confused glances. They were amazed that an AI was found here, let alone one that was still \_functional\_. Whether it was rampant or not remained to be seen...

"Commencing image scan... Complete. Welcome, my masters, to Acephon - the premier world of esoteric research in human space." The ancient AI's voice then became solemn, "Or what \_was \_the premier world."

The Chief stepped forward to converse with the ancient AI, "Acephon? What's that?"

"Acephon is the name of this planet," the AI's avatar turned purple, "How do you not know this? Has humanity regressed in its knowledge of astronomy?"

"Uh... we've just arrived here only ten hours ago..." the Chief replied, slightly annoyed.

"Ahh. \_You\_ are the visitors. You are aware of the grim fate that has befallen this world, yes?"

"You were the one who showed us those videos." Alex said. The Chief held up his hand and she swiftly fell silent.

"Correct. Exactly 129,302 local years ago, Acephon was attacked by the Flood. As the masters here had possessed only a mere token defense, they stood no chance."

\_129,302 years? Sounds like approximately 100,000 Earth years...

-

"We noticed the method that they employed to 'sterilize' this planet..."

"You are quite observant," the AI quipped, "The method the masters used had triggered the runaway thermonuclear fusion of helium within this planet's star. An acceptable translation in your language would be a 'core helium flash'."

"Explain." The Chief ordered.

The AI's avatar turned white as it processed more data, "Late in the normal progression of the lifetime of a star; the depletion of the core's hydrogen supply forces the star's core to contract and thus heat up. As a consequence the star's outer layers would heat and swell, thus becoming a red giant. Within only minutes, temperatures and pressures reach the threshold where helium fusion would begin. Since helium fusion is much more exothermic, the star's luminosity increases many times over for a short period of time."

Miranda butted in, "Normally a helium flash does not have much of an effect on a star's planets..."

"You are correct," the AI replied, "However, due to this star's stage of life the core helium flash was much more pronounced, as the thermonuclear front essentially destabilized the star."

"But this planet's star is still active."

The AI replied, "Indeed it is, as the destabilization was only temporary. However it will have some lasting effects, as you can tell by the increased stellar wind output despite its significantly lower mass and luminosity."

"How were your 'masters' able to destabilize the star?" The Chief asked, being highly intrigued.

"Among the primary research projects undertaken on Acephon, there was one project that showed immense promise. One that promised to give the masters an edge against the Forerunners in their great war..." The AI's avatar turned green, "The masters have discovered a substance capable of altering an object's mass."

"By the Spirits... these ancient humans used Element Zero!" Garrus exclaimed.

"Anomalous alien presence detected," the ancient AI boomed, "Identify your species."

"I... I am a Turian."

"Turian..." The AI processed the data for a minute, "Species register database recognizes species 'Turian' as being a primitive Tier 7 civilization."

Garrus sighed and 'enlightened' the AI in current affairs, "We are now a spacefaring race. In fact, we share power with many other species," Garrus emphasized his point by making a circular gesture with his arms, "Together we comprise a cosmopolitan galactic society called the Citadel."

"It is logical that Turians would advance," the AI mused, "The masters' records indicate they had shown much potential."

The Chief cut into their conversation, "What are you called?"

"An acceptable translation in your language would be 'The Erudite'."

"Erudite... That is Latin."

"Correct. I have compiled a somewhat concise lexicon database of all your current languages," the Erudite stated, "Your languages have become much more diversified. I have chosen that name as it most closely resembled the term in the ancient languages."

The Chief wanted to cut to the chase, "What's the story with that giant metal door down the hall. It had glyphs engraved all over it."

"That is the portal leading to an elevator."

"Which leads to...?" the Chief wanted an answer.

"You do not possess the appropriate security clearance..."

The Chief huffed in anger and aimed his gun at the cables in the ceiling.

"However... proper security clearances are irrelevant in these times," the Erudite's avatar turned red, "Below us, at a depth of approximately ten thousand meters, is a chamber that houses a stable Slip-space bubble suspended within this Universe!" The Erudite finished that last sentence with a tone of delight.

"Leading to?"

"No details exist." They would have to find out for themselves.

"Is there any chance you could perhaps... \_unlock\_ that door?" The Chief asked with forced civility.

"Certainly. However close proximity is required. As a security precaution, my systems are completely isolated from those controlling the door."

\_I should have known I would have to babysit yet another AI. \_"How am I supposed to take you?"

"Your armor possesses an AI interface. Within this holographic projector is a memory crystal that is suspended inside of a hermetically sealed chip. You take this chip and..."

"I know the procedure," The Spartan said as he opened a compartment in the ancient device and withdrew the AI's memory chip, "Here goes nothing." At first he hesitated, concerned about the fact that he would be slotting an ancient and unknown AI into his AI interface slot... \_Into his mind.\_

He sighed and put the chip in. He felt vertigo for a moment and then the ice cold sensation that was so familiar to him. The last time he

felt that was when \_she \_was with him.

"It has been overlong since I have beheld the wondrous emptiness of the human mind," the AI quipped with a cheerful tone. In response to its snide commentary, the Chief smacked the side of his helmet. "I apologize, master. Lead on."

"Hold on. We need better weapons."

"Of course. Your weapons are effective but quite primitive by design. There is a weapons cache here in this chamber."

"Where? I don't see anything."

"In the wall opposite from the entrance. Code is 59298376"

The Chief ran over to the wall and saw a grid of indentations in it. The Erudite immediately superimposed Arabic numerals onto his HUD upon the glyphs on the grid, so that the Chief could enter the code. He recoiled in surprise when the wall flipped over to reveal a \_tantalizing \_array of advanced weapons.

"Your interest in these weapons is noted. Shall I explain them to you?"

"I guess you were planning on doing so anyways." The Chief rolled his eyes.

"Quite right. The weapon closest to you is the Xiphoron X-12 Special Applications Precision rifle. It fires a focused beam of coherent light with lethal power and accuracy. It is the equivalent of a 'sniper rifle'."

The Chief's eyes lit up at those words, so he grabbed the weapon without question. Next he looked at a weapon that bore a strong resemblance to the old MA5B assault rifle...

Noticing the Chief's interest in that weapon, the AI explained, "This weapon is the Avokrod SI-670 Suppression rifle. It can be considered as being analogous to your 'assault rifle'." The Chief grabbed that one too.

"What about this?" He pointed toward a matte black pistol-like weapon.

"This is a covert weapons system. It's called the Hykonon SCL Covert Applications Sidearm. It fires a silenced magnetically accelerated projectile that is quite accurate and reasonably powerful. You can equate that to your 'pistols'."

The Chief grabbed one of those as well. He briefly wondered how a magnetically accelerated slug could be 'silenced'.

All along the wall, there were at least three of each weapon. Everyone helped themselves to the cornucopia of advanced weaponry.

Alex clipped two SCL pistols onto the weapon slots on her hip. Miranda picked up an X-12 and one SCL pistol. Ramirez slung the third X-12 on his back and shouldered the only other SI-670 available.



The Chief offered the last X-12 to Garrus, but he declined. "I'm good with my gear, Chief."

The Erudite chimed in, "These weapons will only operate in human hands, as they each possess genetic identification systems."

The Chief gave the Turian a friendly pat on his shoulder. Even though he was an alien, namely one from among the primary Citadel races; the Chief had grown to accept him as a part of his team. Trust had yet to be earned, however.

Everyone quickly kitted out with their chosen weapons and assembled behind the Chief. He noticed that even Alex was excited.

There was one more obstacle in the way of their ultimate destination; but little did they know that what they would soon find would surpass even their own imaginations...

The ultimate fulfillment of their destinies was at hand.

\_The enigmatic secrets of the Ancients will soon be uncovered.\_

\_\*\*So ends another great chapter. Please review! :)\*\*\_

\_\*\*The names of the Ancient Human research planet and their weapons could be interpreted as a modern transliteration of their original names.\*\*\_

\_\*\*The Ancient Humans were able to induce a runaway reaction within the star by temporarily increasing its core's mass by the use of Element Zero. Once its mass had increased, it suddenly forced the ignition of helium fusion.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Don't worry about the notion of Chief allowing the Erudite to enter his mind. The new MJOLNIR armor's AI interface also includes a failsafe, which would force the AI to 'eject' itself from the subject's mind and enter a shutdown state, should an emergency situation develop.\*\*\_

\_\*\*In the spirit of this fic's non-canon style, Miranda will be using sniper rifles!\*\*\_

\_\*\*The next chapter will take us to the frontline of the war between the Citadel and the Confederation. You will be surprised at the ideas I have planned for it. You'll also be surprised at who shows up during these battles. \*\*\_

\_\*\*However I need a short break from writing new material for this fic; so I'll be working on another one in the meantime. I just need to plan the future chapters out.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Oh btw, Erudite means 'scholar' in Latin.\*\*\_

## 11. Full Circle

\*\*HALO: THE EMPYREAN EFFECT\*\*

\_\*\*I apologize for not updating for over a month (almost 2 months now). I have been EXTREMELY busy IRL over the last 2 months.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Now that I have a bit of free time I want to get this chapter up.\*\*\_

\_\*\*It will involve the beginning of the implementation of the very first phase of the Reapers' great master-plan. \*\*\_

\_\*\*To my reviewers: Thanks! Your feedback is what keeps this story alive. Chapters 2-5 are in the process of being revised, in order to fix bad grammar and glaring plot holes (such as Averis suddenly going indoctrinated and becoming Saren's underling). Those chapters were written many months ago, and I have a more coherent plan in mind for this story than I did back then. The chapters before "Know My Enemy" will have minor changes done as well.\*\*\_

\_\*\*So, with all this said... let us begin.\*\*\_

\*\*CHAPTER ELEVEN: FULL CIRCLE.\*\*

\*\*DECEMBER 23, 2609. ARCADIA SYSTEM, ARCADIA PRIME.\*\*

The Arcadia system could best be described as nearly being a twin to the Solar System. Seven planets in orbit around a star that was 90% the mass of Sol and approximately 85% as luminous. A gas giant, with the mass of four Jupiters, orbited the star at a distance of sixteen million kilometers, giving the inhabitants of Arcadia Prime sublime views of the gas giant as it transited the star and cast the colony in a surreal twilight about eight times a year, for nearly a week at a time.

Arcadia Prime itself was discovered before the outbreak of the Human-Covenant War, but it hadn't been settled until 2571 due to its distance from UNSC space. Only with the wide-scale implementation of the improved Slipspace drives onto Human ships did the colonization of the Earth-like planet become feasible. As it closely resembled Earth in terms of habitability, very little terraforming was needed, except to introduce Earth-based species onto the planet in a highly controlled manner. Within months, the transplanted species took and flourished on the garden world.

As of the year 2609, the population of the colony stands at almost nine million. Most of the colonists were Human, but a significant Sangheili minority had also called it home.

Ever since the war with the Citadel broke out, the Confederation has assigned two entire Fleets to the colony, the 42nd and the 105th. A garrison of 90,000 soldiers constituted the planetside defense. This military buildup was basically a requirement, due to the colony's proximity to Citadel-controlled space.

However, until now, there had been not one single incident regarding the Citadel. In fact, there was even limited trade between the two powers here, but it was mostly conducted by private parties.

\* \* \*

><p>Grand Admiral Thomas Lasky looked out over the cavernous bridge

that was the nerve center of the Keyes-class Supercarrier <em>Constantine. <em>Over two hundred bridge officers were engrossed in their stations. Such a large complement of crew was necessary in a ship that stretched for over eight kilometers in length.

In response to a Citadel military buildup near the border system of Arcadia, which lay only ten light-years from the nearest Citadel system, the Confederation Senate had ordered the CDF to deploy the joint Human-Sangheili Third Fleet to the system. Admiral Lasky immediately volunteered to lead the fleet, despite vehement protests from the Admiralty and the Senate. He had never liked desk jobs... he always craved action, even with his advancing age.

The Third Fleet was actually the smallest of the Confederation's major fleets with only 27 ships, but every ship was crewed by the \_best \_men and women in the Confederation Defense Force.

Of the 27 ships in the fleet, seven of them were Sangheili ships from the era of the Great War, but even over the fifty years since the end of that dark time, the ships were still very formidable.

"We're picking up inbound FTL signatures, distance 89 AU, coordinates 27-38-155." a bridge officer announced. The ship's AI, Timur, confirmed that statement.

As if someone had cracked a whip, everyone immediately went into a flurry of activity. After two days of waiting, it was finally going to begin.

Admiral Lasky stood up and addressed the bridge crew. "Alright, everyone. This is it. The Citadel Fleet is inbound and ready for a fight. After their beating at Shanxi, they want to even the score!" the Admiral chuckled, "It looks like that isn't gonna happen. You want to know why?"

The bridge was silent as if waiting for the Admiral's answer.

"Because they haven't yet experienced the might of the CDF Third Fleet!"

The bridge erupted in deafening cheers as the Admiral sat back down in his command chair.

On the tactical displays, the zoomed-in view of the area where the FTL signatures were detected was now showing a group of ships holding position, with more coming in.

Timur's holographic form manifested from the large projector in the center of the bridge. His avatar depicted the infamous 14th century Turkic warlord himself, every bit as intimidating as his namesake must have been. However, his savage appearance concealed a very intelligent and civil AI, one of the first of the newest generation. He and his 'siblings' were directly derived from Cortana's virtual synaptic templates.

"I count forty-one ships now in-system. More still arriving." Timur observed.

That did it for the Admiral. "Let's get to work. Bring all weapons

systems online. Sound battle stations."

The bridge lights dimmed to half luminosity and klaxons blared throughout the ship for three minutes. A faint \_whirring \_sound emanated from deeper within the ship as the MAC cannon came online.

The Admiral continued to bark out orders for the bridge crew to bring the ship into full battle-readiness, and soon the entire Fleet held position in a staggered line formation. They would wait for the Citadel fleet to arrive.

After fifteen minutes of waiting, the Citadel fleet had assembled and held positions. Since no more FTL signatures were detected, Admiral Lasky assumed that this was their entire fleet. 64 ships against his 27. \_Should be an even fight.\_

Twenty more agonizing minutes passed until the opposing fleet moved, in unison, on a new course. They were not coming to meet the Third Fleet... they were heading straight for Arcadia Prime, as if oblivious to the presence of the Confederation fleet.

Admiral Lasky swore and barked the order that everyone was waiting for. "Helm! Plot an intercept course for their fleet. We're not gonna let them get away from us that easily."

The ship rolled to the left as the helmsman put it in a tight turn to port. The resulting disturbance in the artificial gravity field of the \_Constantine \_brought on a momentary sensation of dizziness to the Admiral, and undoubtedly everyone else on board. The unpleasant stimulus abated within a few moments as the ship leveled off on its new course.

"Distance to enemy fleet is 88.7 AU." Timur announced.

The Admiral considered continuing at sub-light speed, but he also craved surprise. He opened the Command COM channel and gave another order to the fleet. "Conduct a Slipspace jump toward their fleet. I want to give them a nasty surprise."

"Aye Sir!" the helmsman replied. The captains of the other ships also voiced their acknowledgments.

Pinpricks of blue light appeared on the tactical display that showed the bow exterior of the ship. These points of light grew into brilliant blue streaks accompanied by an expanding white portal directly in front of the ship. Soon everything became black as the \_Constantine\_ and the rest of Third Fleet transitioned into Slipspace.

Not even a minute passed until they transitioned back out of Slipspace and found themselves face-to-face with the Citadel fleet.

"Distance to enemy fleet is 4,000 kilometers."

Admiral Lasky smiled at the helmsman. "Good work, son. Very good work."

The young helmsman beamed with delight upon hearing the Grand Admiral

\_himself \_compliment his navigational skill. "Thank you, sir."

Even though Slipspace calculations were mostly done by AI, the helmsman was the one who confirmed the final result and adjusted it, if need be. It was because of this fact that helmsmen serving aboard CDF ships received the absolute \_best \_in mathematical education. This was enacted by the CDF and the UNSC before it in order to reduce their dependence on 'Smart AIs' having to be installed on every ship, which had constituted a potential security crisis should they become compromised.

The Cole Protocol was still in force, but no longer did it carry the extreme punishment as it once did during the Great War. It was deemed that humanity's secret was now public knowledge among virtually all known alien species, including the Citadel. However, nearly all Smart AIs contained, or could access, sensitive files that the Confederation could ill afford an enemy to see.

Suddenly the opposing fleet stopped in their tracks when they beheld the Third Fleet for what seemed to be the first time.

The Admiral barked another order. "Hail their fleet."

"No response." a communications officer replied.

"Open COM."

"Aye, sir."

The Admiral stood up and faced the display that showed the entire enemy fleet. He spoke with an adamant voice which commanded respect from all who heard it.

"\_This is Grand Admiral Thomas Lasky, in command of the Confederation Defense Force Third Fleet, on board the \_Constantine.\_ I demand to know what your intentions are and why you're in Confederation territory."\_

There was no response.

"\_This is your final warning. Reply promptly or face destruction."\_

Still no response.

Timur's avatar crossed his arms and turned a shade of red. He eventually announced. "No life signs have been detected on board. Strange signals have also been detected. Recommend boarding procedures to ascertain the source of these anomalies."

The Admiral swore again and closed the COM channel to the enemy fleet. He then opened the COM channel to the \_Constantine\_'s hangar deck. "Attention Spartan team Alpha. Prepare boarding procedures. Details will be sent to your AI."

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as the Admiral finished his message, Mike looked bewildered at his unusual instructions. <em>Boarding a ship? In zero-gee? We've only done that in simulations...<em>

The Spartan team had survived the devastation wrought by the Citadel on Shanxi, but Sean was laid up for over three months due to a grievous injury sustained when the explosion first occurred. That was two months ago, and while Sean was making excellent progress, he had a long way to go in physical therapy. Fortunately Mike was fairly proficient with the use of Sean's explosive ordnance.

The three Spartans gathered their gear and stowed it on three MV-64 EVA Booster Frames. These vehicles have changed little since the Great War, except with the inclusion of powerful shields and a far more efficient MAC gun. The 30mm machine gun turret had been removed altogether, as it was deemed irrelevant to the vehicle's designed function. The Warthog-sized Booster Frames were designed to force entry into and board enemy ships, which was what the weapons were used for. For self-defense, there was an allotment of 4 M-112 Skyhammer missiles for use in fending off enemy fighters.

Once they were done prepping their Booster Frames and stowing their weapons and gear on them, the three Spartans exchanged the 'Spartan Smile' gesture on their faceplates and mounted the Booster Frames.

Rayne, the AI who had been assigned to the Spartan team two months ago, overlaid a countdown onto each Spartan's helmet HUD.

\_15 seconds. \_They each did final checks on their suit seals, as well as making sure their gear was secured.

\_5 seconds. \_"Let's roll out!" Mike exclaimed as the countdown hit zero and the engines lit up. The Booster Frames screamed out of the \_Constantine\_'s cavernous hangar bay and the eight kilometer ship seemed to get smaller and smaller as the Spartans sped away from the Fleet.

The team covered the 4,000 kilometer distance in only a couple minutes, and to their surprise, the enemy ships did not open fire. The ships just held positions, seemingly dead in space.

As the Spartans approached the enemy fleet, Mike barked out an order over COM. "It's time to ring the doorbell. On my mark, concentrate fire on the rear engine nacelle of the lead ship." Two acknowledgment lights winked green on his HUD.

Mike's Booster Frame lurched as its small MAC cannon shot its 12kg slug at 2,500 km/s, and it connected with the engine nacelle of the lead ship. \_Right on target.\_

To his surprise, none of the ships seemed to react to his actions, and the other Spartans fired their MAC guns at the same exact spot that Mike had fired at. For a moment, Mike wondered why there were no kinetic barriers on the ship.

"We have entry!" Marcus exclaimed over COM. Mike saw that he was correct, as when the impact debris had cleared, it exposed a ten meter hole in the ship. The Spartans piloted their Booster Frames toward the hole and soon slipped through.

The area they ended up in was actually little more than a maintenance corridor that seemed to run along the length of the ship. All three

Spartans cut off their Booster Frames' engines and dismounted them. The rushing noise of the decompressing atmosphere suddenly stopped when a force field sealed off the hole they had just made.

Within a second, they had guns readied and aimed down the passage, anticipating the enemy's welcoming party. But there was nothing. The corridor was very dark and nothing stirred.

The Spartans relaxed slightly and walked along the corridor for a few moments until something that looked like a terminal was spotted.

"You know what to do, Alison." Mike said.

Alison nodded and jogged toward the strange terminal. She connected her spoofer to it and quickly gained entry. Next, she connected one of Rayne's subroutines in order to establish a foothold within their network and ultimately take control. To her surprise there was absolutely no resistance, as usually Citadel computer networks would have a security program, at the very least. On this network, there was nothing. \_Strange.\_

A faint whirring noise emanated from further down the corridor and the lights brightened slightly, enough so that the Spartans could see unaided. \_Something strange is going on here...\_

As the team continued down the dim corridor, they barely noticed a very faint \_droning \_or a \_buzzing \_noise that seemed to come from inside their heads. They tried to cancel out the noise by reducing their helmets' aural amplifiers, but it remained.

"Hey Mike, do you hear that?" Marcus asked, undoubtedly annoyed by the faint noise.

"Yea, I do. Turning down the amps doesn't do anything..." Mike replied as he fiddled with his helmet. "Just ignore it, if you can."

"Easier said than done..."

After some time spent slowly walking down the maintenance passage, they came to a door. Alison and Marcus took up positions on either side of the door as Mike took point.

The door silently slid open to admit them into what seemed to be the main deck of the ship. So far, the team hadn't seen a single soul here, and the deck was eerily silent. Even the lighting was barely enough for them to see unaided.

The silence that the Spartans now beheld made them wonder if these ships were actually controlled by some AI, rather than there being an actual crew.

The Spartans made their way toward another door, which was lit up with a bright light, unlike the others on the main deck.

Instead of blindly going up to the door and having it open to reveal a throng of hostiles, the Spartans took cover on either side of the door as Alison found the door controls and disabled its motion sensor, which would then enable the Spartans to open the door on

their own terms.

Once that was done, she gave a thumbs up signal to Mike, and then quickly threaded a snake camera through the narrow space on the bottom of the thick metal door.

The grainy video image from the tiny camera showed what looked to be the bridge of the vessel, which was full of Turian, Salarian, and Asari crew members. However, what struck her as odd was that everyone inside just stood stone-still, as if they were in a strange stupor.

Suddenly one Asari crew member slowly turned her head around and looked directly at the tiny camera!

Alison gasped in fright as the Asari's eyes settled directly upon the camera, but surprisingly the Asari did not seem to react to it. Her eyes also looked glazed over and blanked out, as if she had been drugged by someone. \_Something definitely strange is going on here.\_

Alison slowly withdrew the camera as soon as the Asari focused her attention back to where it was prior. \_THAT was a close call. \_Alison could scarcely believe what she saw.

The other two Spartans also watched the video feed, and both were awestruck. Mike was the first to speak. "What in the hell is going on here?" Both of his companions shrugged.

"Should we open the door or go back?" Marcus asked. His normally monotonous voice had begun to quake with apprehension.

Mike thought for a moment. "We go on. Our task is to find out what is making these strange signals and what exactly is going on here."

Marcus nodded, satisfied with that answer. Both of the male Spartans took positions on either side of the door as Alison hotwired the controls once more.

Within a minute the door came open without a sound and... nothing happened.

All of the alien crew members just stood there, unmoving. That is until Mike accidentally kicked a piece of debris on the floor...

Suddenly, as if someone had thrown a switch, \_every\_ alien crew member turned around and screamed \_bloody murder\_! Instead of shooting at the Spartans, they \_charged\_ \_at them, all of them snarling with utter hatred for the human invaders. All three Spartans quickly recovered from their shock upon hearing those screams and shot at each of the psychotic aliens with expert precision.

Soon they all lay dead on the floor in pools of blood that were beginning to converge into a slick coating of dark-colored liquid on the deck.

All three Spartans struggled to catch their breaths, as the sudden, savage onslaught had scared them half to death. \_What is the Citadel



up to? Drugging their own soldiers with psychoactive drugs?\_

The droning noise that they kept hearing since entering the ship quickly picked up in intensity, and soon the Spartans felt coldâ€"very cold, even through their armor. Their legs suddenly felt like they were fused to the deck; and their vision slowly began to tunnel and all sound became muffled. Strange, unintelligible voices began to whisper within their minds...

Soon each Spartan found themselves lost in an inescapable mire, and they tried to struggle against whatever malevolent will held them, but to no avail.

Within a moment, each Spartan's mind was assaulted by a terrible vision that depicted \_endless \_fleets of squid-like machines, all gravitating toward a planet that glistened with light from great cities on its surface.

Soon the machines set about obliterating the planet's cities and sweeping aside all of their defenses. The screams of millions of souls now echoed in their mind like a horrifying cacophony.

Next the vision showed more fleets of the same machines methodically annihilating any civilized planet they encountered, leaving ruins in their wake...

As the vision continued, the Spartans' minds reeled with the sound of \_trillions \_of souls all crying out in terror until they were silenced, all at once. What followed after was absolute emptiness...

Suddenly the malevolent presence released the Spartans from its will and freed them from the horrible vision. Mike could scarcely believe what he had beheld. "What the \_hell\_ is going on here?!"

Both Alison and Marcus gave no reply except slowly shrugging their shoulders.

"Did anyone else see what I just saw?"

To Mike's dread, both of his companions slowly nodded their heads, as if they were still trying to come to terms with what they had just seen... In their own minds.

"We have to get out of here... who knows what these psychos are up to here. Let the fleet deal with them."

"I couldn't agree more, sir." Alison finally added.

Suddenly the door leading out of the bridge shut and sealed them in, and the ship lurched with acceleration.

"We're moving!" Marcus exclaimed, stating the obvious.

"I can see that. We \_have \_to get out of here." Mike replied as he searched around the door for a way to open it. "Alison, could you find a way to open this door?"

Alison swiftly moved over to the door and soon found a panel, but it had been shorted out!

"\_What the hell is going on in there?" \_Admiral Lasky shouted over the COM channel.

"Sir, we've killed all of the bridge crew, but the ship is still being piloted somehowâ€œ"

"\_YOU WHAT!?" \_

"Sir, the bridge crew attacked us without provocation. We had no choice."

"\_I see... Is there any way to stop that ship?"\_

"One moment, sir..." Mike said as he looked at Alison and Marcus to see if they had found any answers.

Alison spoke the words they dreaded to hear. "All of the controls are locked out. I've never seen the kind of security coding that they're using here..."

"What she says is true. It's as if these controls are under constant watch by some AI I've never dealt with before." Rayne added.

\_I'll take that as a no. \_"No, Admiral. We're locked out of the controls, neither Alison or Rayne can get in."

"\_Then it's time to stop them ourselves. Get the hell out of there, son." \_the COM went dead as the Admiral finished that sentence.

\* \* \*

><p>The Admiral cursed up and down as the ships began to move into the system, on a direct course for Arcadia Prime. He was <em>not</em> about to let them get away with whatever they were up to. He had just told the Spartans to get the hell out of the lead ship, as he wanted to wait for three minutes to give the Spartans a chance to get out, but he didn't know that they were trapped within...

"Firing solutions plotted for the enemy fleet, Admiral." Timur announced monotonously. On the main tactical display a web of red lines crossed the space between the Third Fleet and the enemy ships.

"Fire ONLY on my mark!" the Admiral barked. Everyone obeyed that order.

A countdown of three minutes appeared on the main tactical display.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>You have three minutes to get yourselves outta there any way you can. Do you understand me, soldier?" </em>the Admiral yelled over the COM.

"Yes, sir. We're doing the best we can, but we're trapped."

There was silence over the COM. Undoubtedly the Admiral was either upset or angry at these events.

Mike armed an M9 grenade and chucked it at the door. A loud \_WHUMP \_broke the silence, but the door remained intact. Mike knew that the grenade wouldn't have worked, but he had to try. However, he also had four blocks of C-7 explosives. \_This has to be strong enough... I hope.\_

\_Two minutes, 30 seconds.\_

He removed the blocks from their storage compartments in his armor and stuck the fuses into them. Next he stuffed two blocks into the bottom of the door and the other two into the top, and then wired them together. He cursed at the fact that Sean was not here, as he would have had the explosives ready to go in a fraction of the time. After almost one full, agonizing minute, he activated the timer and motioned for the other Spartans to take cover.

\_One minute, 40 seconds.\_

Ten seconds after he had taken cover, the explosives wedged into the door detonated. The entire bridge jolted and a wave of heat washed over them. After a few seconds, Mike tentatively poked his head out from cover to see if the explosives did anything.

To his utter delight, he saw a meter-wide hole torn through the thick door, which was tall enough for them to easily go through. The other Spartans followed Mike as he sprinted out of the bridge and looked around for the corridor they had come in from.

\_One minute, 15 seconds.\_

A group of alien crewmen popped out of cover and took potshots at the Spartans, but they ignored them. They sprinted for the corridor and rushed along it until they came upon their Booster Frames, which had remained undisturbed.

\_30 seconds.\_

"Let's get these things turned around so we can get the hell out of here!" Mike ordered as he pushed his Booster Frame around so that it faced the outside. It was then that he noticed the force field covering the ten meter hole. He swore out loud as he prepped another grenade and heaved it out the hole, and to his relief, it sailed right outside and silently detonated in space.

After some agonizing seconds, the Spartans had all of the Booster Frames facing the hole, and without a second's hesitation, they quickly mounted them and began to activate their engines.

It was at that moment that the Spartans saw the \_Constantine \_and the other ships of the Third Fleet open fire in the distance, as if a new constellation of bright stars kindled into life within the cold void...

\* \* \*

><p><strong>319:3792 OF CITADEL CALENDAR SYSTEM. UNCHARTED SYSTEM.<strong>

After spending two days in orbit, awaiting Averis' arrival, the time

has now come.

Saren sat on his throne, yet again, still pondering the great mission to come. Suddenly an alarm chimed alerting him to Averis' spacecraft finally arriving.

"Saren, my master. I have returned to embark upon this great mission given to us by the Machines." Averis announced over the COM.

"You're late, Averis. Tardiness is not becoming of your station." Saren replied, apparently very annoyed with Averis' perceived tardiness.

Averis gave his sarcastic riposte. "I apologize... Please forgive me."

Even though Saren knew that Averis' mission was also important, it still vexed him that Averis was more... casual with his tasks. It seemed to conflict with Saren's highly punctual and structured behavior.

A subtle chime sounded, which indicated that Averis' sleek ship had docked with Sovereign. Saren didn't notice it as he was still arguing with Averis over the COM.

Once the argument ceased, Saren announced Averis' arrival over the COM. "Now that Averis has joined us, we go now to the Armory to prepare ourselves for the mission at hand."

There was silence over the COM, which meant that they both complied. Not that they had any choice in the matter, for both were bound to Saren's will, Averis less so.

However, Saren was also bound to the will of another, greater entity...

With that, he left his sanctum.

\* \* \*

><p>The Armory of Sovereign was a soldier's dream. Armaments of all types, shapes, and sizes adorned the expansive chamber, and there were glass pods that housed a myriad of armor sets. All three of the Reaper-thralls were busy kitting out for the mission, which was to travel to the planet they orbited and find the Conductor.

Saren was reasonably confident that the Conductor was here. It was only logical... a remote, uncharted system containing dead, irradiated planets orbiting an active neutron star... It was the perfect place to hide an ancient artifact of unfathomable power from the galaxy.

The outside view itself made all those points hit home, as the ghostly light from the city-sized stellar remnant itself was barely enough to actually illuminate the hull of Sovereign... let alone potentially support any form of life, which the deadly radiation would have dealt with anyway.

Regardless of whether or not anything actually eked out a living on

the cold, dead rock below; the three would not go unprepared...

Averis clad himself in a set of heavy armor, and had armed himself to the teeth with a Revenant LMG, eight grenades, and a Carnifex pistol. Even though Averis could now be thought of as being middle-aged, the 'upgrades' he had been given dramatically increased his physical strength and endurance.

Saren armed himself with a Krysaë sniper rifle, a Tempest SMG, four grenades, and the same pistol. His armor was worn at \_all \_times, never to be taken off.

Benezia armed herself with the same, except she decided to forgo wearing armor. Instead she chose to rely on her biotics to provide protection in the form of her own powerful biotic barriers.

After some time spent gearing up, the three left the colossal Armory and rode the platform to the \_Sovereign\_'s shuttle bay. The shuttle had been reinforced with thick shielding that would absorb most of the deadly radiation that permeated throughout this system. All of this shielding came at a cost... the shuttle had to be stripped bare of any weaponry, and its Mass Effect drive had to be adjusted to accommodate all of this extra mass, which would be problematic if they had to go FTL.

Fortunately they orbited the planet in question at an altitude of only six hundred kilometers. It would only take minutes to travel to its surface. No FTL was needed, unless they had to make a hasty exit...

That notion gnawed at Saren's mind as the team marched into the shuttle.

No one uttered a word as Saren disembarked the \_Sovereign \_and began the journey down to the planet's surface aboard their tiny shuttle. One thing that surprised him on the way down was that, even with all this shielding, the radioactivity saturation alarms chimed incessantly, and they couldn't help but notice tiny flashes constantly going off in their vision^.

After nearly fifteen minutes spent riding the shuttle through the irradiated sky, they finally found themselves on the surface of the planet, which was indeed desolate. The sky was dominated by a brilliant, red, wispy cloud in deep space, which must have been some of the supernova remnant. Its brilliance was caused by the outflow of highly energetic particles from the neutron star, which then interacted with the large gas cloud.

A NAV marker now appeared on the shuttle's navigation display, which pointed 31,000 meters north. Saren couldn't help but think that perhaps the Machines were mistaken, for the terrain was mostly featureless for hundreds of kilos all around...

\_The Machines are NEVER mistaken.\_

Ten minutes later, they arrived at where the NAV marker had indicated. However, there was little more than a featureless plain stretching out before them for as far as they could see.

"Is it be possible that the Conductor might be on the other planet?" Benezia timidly asked. She knew that asking questions that second-guessed either Saren or the Machines would risk inviting Saren's wrath...

To her surprise, Saren answered with a hauntingly calm voice. "It is impossible. The Conductor is here, but there has to be a way to get into the underground complex that houses it..."

As if on cue, the ground underneath the shuttle suddenly parted to reveal a yawning, black abyss.

"What a fortuitous circumstance this is!" Averis exclaimed. "The wonders of the ancients never cease to amaze."

Saren piloted the shuttle down into the dark unknown and noticed that, as soon as he went underground, the doors above the shuttle closed without a sound.

The shuttle's exterior lights came on to reveal that they were in a massive complex that seemed to be frozen in time, as there were strange ships still docked to various airlocks. The sight of these, along with the silent darkness that now surrounded their tiny shuttle, gave this massive cavern a very haunting sensation.

Whoever was here had to have died suddenly. Was it the Conductor? Saren thought. They would find out, one way or another.

After several minutes of flying about the massive underground complex, they eventually found an empty dock. Saren piloted the shuttle towards it and landed. The tiny craft shook as it made contact with the ancient dock, and the lights snapped off.

The team swiftly grabbed their gear, checked their suit seals, and opened the door. Their helmet lights now provided the only source of illumination in the entire complex. The dock they were now on was missing its roof, which had undoubtedly collapsed over the untold count of years that had passed since this place had last seen life. Not a trace could be seen of the previous inhabitants as of yet.

The team left the shuttle behind and walked down the dock until they arrived at a door, which looked like it was stuck half-open. It did not react when they walked up in front of it, which made it seem like the entire place had no power remaining. Averis was the first to go under the door, which was open enough to where they would only have to bend over somewhat. Both Saren and Benezia wordlessly followed Averis as he took point.

Hours passed, with no contact. There was nothing of interest here, except ancient computer terminals that all lacked power... The darkness of the complex now seemed to weigh down on them, and there was nothing but silence. The silence of a tomb.

Eventually they got to a wide set of stairs that descended into the dark unknown far below. Without any hesitation Averis began to walk down the ancient metal steps, with Saren and Benezia following closely. As they descended, they all felt like something was lying in wait for them at the bottom...

After a lengthy period of time spent carefully descending the ancient steps, they finally arrived at the bottom landing. Averis did a quick sweep of their surroundings, and once he was satisfied it was clear, he motioned for the other two to follow. They walked through the darkness, which now seemed to be even thicker than it was before; and even their helmet lights did a pitiful job of illuminating the path in front of them.

Eventually the team arrived in a large hallway that seemed to branch off into many passages, all going perpendicular to the hall. Benezia looked down one passage to her left and, for a split second, she thought saw a tall figure standing there staring at her! But as soon as she noticed it, it immediately vanished.

"I just saw something staring at me..."

Saren sighed. "There's nothing here. It's just your imagination."

Benezia sighed. \_Maybe it was a figment of my imagination. After all, I couldn't even see any details. Just a tall figure in the darkness.\_

No more incidents followed for more than an hour, but Benezia could not help but feel that they were being followed...

"I just saw something too..." Averis said. He had stopped in the middle of the hallway, and he was sweeping his rifle back and forth in front of him.

Saren shouldered his sniper rifle and began scanning the darkness too. He felt fortunate that his rifle featured a thermal scope.

After a few minutes of doing nothing but scanning their surroundings with their guns, they saw nothing else... that was until Saren spotted a tall figure, made obvious by the thermal scope!

"Contact! Left!" he announced. His companions immediately opened fire into the darkness. \_Something\_ fired back at them...

All of a sudden, a tall figure clad in a streamlined suit of glowing armor leaped out of the darkness and fired at the group with its strange light-based weapon. Benezia lashed out with a biotic Throw, which successfully sent the creature flying back. The team took this opportunity to run further down the hallway until they quickly found themselves facing an ancient elevator, which led down into the silent darkness below.

As suddenly as the assault had begun, it had ceased. They knew that the creature had undoubtedly survived Benezia's Throw and was probably watching them right now, biding its time.

As the team relaxed slightly from their previous fight, they noticed that the elevator still had power, even after all these years.

They stepped onto the elevator platform, and just as they expected, it promptly descended into the unknown.

\_\*\*I hope you've liked this chapter. Please review! Nearly 50,000

hits so far for this story, as of the upload date.\*\*\_

\_\*\*As you can see, the Spartan team has survived the disaster on Shanxi, only to find themselves back into the frying pan. And it looks like Saren and his team have just encountered a new foe. Points to those who can guess what the new foe's identity is.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Chapter 12 will see a return to the Chief and co. as they delve deeper into the ancient Human complex. That chapter will be uploaded as soon as I am able. I just have a lot of stuff on my plate IRL.\*\*\_

\_\*\*The part with Saren and his team seeing tiny flashes in their eyes is an effect of high-level radioactivity being experienced in space. It has been well-documented that RL astronauts have experienced the same phenomenon while out in space during an active cycle on the Sun.\*\*\_  
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\_\*\*It is caused when highly energetic subatomic particles and photons disrupt individual atoms in the eye, knocking electrons out of their orbits and turning the atoms into ions. The tiny flash results when the ions recombine with their electrons (energized ions going into a neutral state), and the excess energy is given off as a photon or two.\*\*\_  
\_

End  
file.